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THE SIAMESE CAT

BY

HENRY MILNER RIDEOUT

*Author of "The White Tiger" "The Far Cry"
"The Key of the Fields and Boldero"
"Tin Cowrie Dass" etc.*

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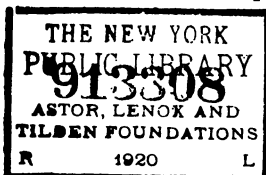


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To my Brother
DUNNING RIDEOUT



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CHAPTER ONE

TIME AND CHANCE



“TIME AND CHANCE”

The Fates and the Feline brought it all to pass. In doing so they roamed a wide territory,— the privilege both of those grim gadabout humourists, the Parcae, and of harmless, necessary cats.

By chance, within the gates of a Japanese temple, a sudden shower caught Owen Scarlett idling, and drove him into the nearest shelter, which happened to be a tiny, dark aquarium. There, lounging pleasantly, listening to the raindrops on the roof, watching the purple and golden fish steer through cool bubbles green as jade, he found himself near a group of three women in the dusk. Europeans, therefore tourists, he thought. As the tank contained nothing but a few coral rocks and pink

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sponges, he was about to pass on, when by chance he saw that one of the sponges was breathing, with an oozy, half-organic motion, sucking in bubbles through some shapeless orifice. He watched, and suddenly the breathing mass shot out, opened like a ragged umbrella of pink flesh, sailed along the glass with tentacles writhing, and stared at them with an evil black eye set in a pulpy face.

The women squealed, and the nearest turned instinctively to Scarlett.

“Horrible!” she cried. “Ugh!” They both made the same face of disgust, and then in a comic impulse of relief, smiled at each other. Even in the green light from the tank, she was a pretty girl. Her eyes shone blue and friendly, her face bright with the candour of youth. In a flash, however, she had bethought herself and turned away.

“It’s a devil-fish, Aunty,” she said with com-

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posure. "Do come and see something pleasant." And she led away her two elder companions.

That was all: but for months afterward, when hard work had crushed out the memory of his brief holiday in Japan; in odd moments, among the leprous goblin cities of the China Coast, among the million rat-hole lives of Canton, or Wu-chow, or Hoi-how, or in offices overlooking the saffron flood and slushy bund of a Shanghai winter, he remembered the incident, and in imagination saw the girl's clear and merry eyes. A trifle to recall; yet it was a vague comfort in some of those lonely, worried, weary moments which, among unholy sights, sounds and stench, come to a solitary white man lost in the flux and flow of the yellow myriads. Once, in Hong-Kong, half way through a letter to his uncle's firm, he looked up from the type-writer, stared across the har-

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bour turmoil of junks and launches to the brick-red hills beyond Kowloon, and said: "I'll bet her aunts were from New England." He laughed, remembering their prim, cool glances at him. And she herself had been dressed in blue and white things. . . .

What nonsense! Back to work, hammering at the keyboard: ". . . in my opinion, therefore, best to sacrifice a little of H. K. profits and get a bigger start in the provinces. Push more of the following chops: 'Dragon-pearl,' 'Long Life,' 'Monkey-Bird' . . ." He ticked manfully onward.

Again by chance: on a steamer bound for Saigon, as he stepped out of his bath, a roll threw him plump against a burly man in a green silk kimono.

"Hello! No harm done!" boomed a cheerful bass. The man was a broad six-footer, with a short, vigorous, grizzled beard parted

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down the middle, and under jutting brows, a pair of deep-set eyes that shone with a changeable light. His air was that of some robust, good-humoured Taipan. "All right?" he laughed; and the tail of his green be-dragoned silk whisked into the next compartment, from which soon issued a genial roar: "O boy! My no towel no have-got! Catchee *mai-wun! Fai-di!*"

On the evening of the same day, in the dining-room, a German antiquary going to Angkor looked up from his solitaire, caught Scarlett's eye across the table, and said guardedly:

"You are not a friendt to der larch man in der corner smoking, and who now hass gone top-side, no?" His glance took in the retreating figure of the man with the trimly parted beard.

"No," said Scarlett.

"Dot iss goot," the German nodded heavily. "It iss Borkman, der biggest scountrel in der

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Oryent. For cardts, women, fraudts, and allerlei badt business, sober or dronk, iss he der vorst.” After intellectual labour, the antiquary played a red Knavé cautiously upon a black Queen. “And dere are many off dem . . . You haf heardt, no, of der missionair’ girl at der Boxers’ troupple, who wass skinnedt alife? He safed his own skin zo. Oh, yess, it iss true.” The antiquary leaned back and told a hideous story in detail, blowing pompous, contented clouds of cigar smoke, brushing the sparks from his Chefoo silk, and looking serenely out of the open door, where to the roll of the ship a large and lustrous star lowered and mounted in the pale moonlit blue. “Alzo, Borkman—he escaped with loot. Der efilmen brosber—*immer so*—*Ach!* . . . But he wass kicked out yet once, in a clubp off Zébu. Gootness me, yess.”

The story was interesting if true, thought

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Scarlett; but the big man, for all that his eyes held at times an opal glow, appeared too frank and hearty for so grim a history. And later, the German innocently told a set of gross fictions, palpable Shanghai "bunders"; whereas the big man, when they reached Saigon, went out of his way to oblige Scarlett with some valuable information, and laughing all thanks jovially aside, disappeared down a wide and empty boulevard of red clay, into that artificial Paris of the Orient.

Again by chance, it was late March when Scarlett opened and joyfully read a letter from his uncle's firm which, ending his long exile on the China seaboard, recalled him to take charge of their Oriental department, and gave him till September to wind up his affairs and reach the home office.

"Must have made good, more or less," thought Owen, happily. "Now which way

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Home? Pacific or Suez?" The *Telegraph Express* showed, among the earliest departures, a German Lloyd for Nagasaki and an Aparcar for Singapore. "Toss for it," he decided. "Heads Lloyd, tails Aparcar." And Fortune, once more pouncing down into the game, rang the Mexican dollar on the table, tails up.

On an April evening in Singapore, he had gone to a ball at the Tanglin Club, where a somewhat fagged company were dancing away the humid hours. Tired of the crowding couples, the lights, the music, the labour of this clammy tropical pastime, Owen was heading for the card-tables, when a friend seized and bore him back:

"No you don't . . . come along . . . present you . . . compatriot of yours . . . Miss Holborow—"

Among the pale and jaded residents she shone out a breezy, tanned seafarer.

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“Why, you’re the devil-fish girl!” he exclaimed. Their laughter mingled happily.

“What a horrid name! But it shows a flattering memory,” she said. “Still, I knew you clear across from the doorway, coming in—”

Scarlett replied, in cold and feeble words for a heart aglow. Their faces might have shown how glad they were; and of this the girl was perhaps aware, for on a sudden she made the matter less personal, saying:

“It’s good to see an American again, isn’t it? You live out here in the East?”

“Not now, thank Heaven,” said Owen. “Ship me somewhere west of Suez. I’m tired of it. I’m just going—” By a flash of genius he stopped before committing himself. “I’m just going about on a few errands, to and fro in the world. You’re travelling, too, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” replied the girl. “My aunt and I are

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going back by Suez. Her friend deserted her in China, and we've taken a courier to protect us, and now we're running up to Siam, to Bangkok."

"That's odd, isn't it?" he returned, brazenly. "I have to go there myself, on — a matter. You go by the German Mail, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, by the 'Prapatom,' on Saturday," she explained. "There'll be a crowd on board, and 'a stupid crowd of foreigners,' I'm afraid."

"I can promise not to be a foreigner, at least," he laughed. "The 'Prapatom' happens to be my steamer. . . ."

A straight and shining military youth suddenly drew himself up tall before them, and drawling officially, reported that the dance was his.

"I hope to see you on board, then, Mr. Scarlett," she called with a smile over her shoulder,

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as she was caught into the whirl of skipping feet and sad, preoccupied faces.

As for Owen, he found an obscure chair in the verandah. For a long time he smoked, grateful to destiny, watching the broad banana leaves, a sheaf of giant quill-pens in living green, as they drooped and swayed in the lamplight under the cool, damp breath of the night breeze. "What luck, what luck!" he told himself in wonder.

Before the morning had time to glare, Owen had rattled in a dark-shuttered *gharri* to the shipping-office; and two days later, sweltering in the muffled sunlight under the "Prapatom's" awning, he had the satisfaction of seeing large canvas trunks, marked "L. H.," slung upon the forward deck by the wild-haired Malays.

"Lucky I didn't toss heads," thought this young adventurer. Never before did clank of winch or chatter of coolies seem so joyful; never

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before the act of waiting so happy and so vexatious.

But he was not of the sort to hurry matters, or plan vulgar stratagems among deck-chairs or places at table. From the upper end of the captain's mess, he had the mild pleasure of bowing to Miss Holborow at the lower. She sat, in white, beside a prim little woman in grey. Down the length of the table the *punkah* wagged slow and cool, like a boom with a valance of canvas flapping below. As he stole a look under the frill of this from time to time, he could see the aunt utter a few staid sentences, and the girl reply.

Presently, to his surprise, in marched a white-clad giant, his friend of the Saigon boat,—Borkman of the parted beard. He chose the chair opposite the two ladies, and bowed with an almost familiar air. They returned the bow graciously enough.

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The captain grunted. He was a clean elderly Englishman, with cheeks ruddy from whisky and tropic weather, but fine grey eyes full of honesty. All through dinner he watched the lower end of the table; at last he beckoned to an alert, little, withered Chinaman in a pale blue robe.

“Ah Fook,” said the captain, rather loudly, “how fashion this coffee b’long no good? Make him more better, chop-chop!”

“Can do,” said the steward, blinking gravely.

“*Man-man*,” the captain went on, in a lowered voice, barely audible to Scarlett. “You see gentleman down next Number One officer? He eat his chow bottom-side Number Two table breakfast. B’long so. You catchee cards. You savee?”

“Can do,” repeated the Celestial.

“Impudent bounder,” the captain grumbled; and then, changing the subject, he re-

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marked to Scarlett, "She's making a good thirteen knots to-night, do you know?"

Whatever hopes Owen might have had for that evening were disappointed; for Miss Holborow stayed in the stuffy saloon and played picquet dutifully with her aunt. Walking seven miles round the deck,—passing from the mystery of vast moonlit space and a witch-fire ocean of phosphorous, astern, into the swaying lantern-light amidships — he could see the two women through one porthole, and through the next, in the little hazy smoking-room, the big countenance of Borkinan, presiding radiantly over a circle of yellow glasses.

"He has cheek enough," thought Scarlett. "I'll have to ask the captain about him some time."

Then came a whole morning of delight. Soon after breakfast, he found himself being introduced to the aunt, and presently sitting in a

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canvas sling chair next Miss Holborow herself.

The aunt was a bright-eyed, spare, spinster-like little matron, whose grey hair was close-hauled about a pert though elderly head. She drew in her chin with a bird-like motion, and gave Owen an odd look, half-friendly, half-suspicious, which declared — “You seem passable, but one can’t be too careful.” All that she said, however, was:

“How do you do, Mr. Scarlett. My niece has told me of having met you at the Tanglin dance.” She spoke as one whose conscience pursues her to the minutest parts of speech. “Your name is very familiar to me: it must be that you have relatives in —” And, being satisfied on this point, Mrs. Holborow withdrew from the conversation, to become calmly engrossed in a magazine essay on “Thoreau, the Man.” Evidently her mind to her a kingdom was; yet Owen, looking up from the happiest

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of talk, could now and then catch the reader's eye flickering back at them warily out of the corner, like the glance of a nervous mare driven without blinders.

There was nothing in the talk to disturb that best of chaperons. The girl and the young man, having laboriously dug up common acquaintances, pitched them overboard and began to find out more about each other. From their long chairs in the canvas-muffled sunlight, they could look under the rail-awnings, out over the sapphire calm of the South China Sea. All about the ship flying-fish, like silver humming-birds, skimmed along on shivering wings, to vanish into the slope of a little wave with a sunlit splash as of bullets volleyed and scattering.

“I'm never tired of seeing them,” said the girl, and screened her eyes with one brown hand.

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“No — yes — very pretty,” replied Scarlett. It was the flutter of her hair in the hot, faint breeze that he had been watching; and his mind was filled with speculation and misgiving. “You’ve chosen lucky weather, and a good voyage. Travellers don’t come up here so often; Bangkok’s a quiet place.”

“That’s just it,” she rejoined. “I’m tired of being a tourist in a groove; my aunt’s tired of places that are *not* quiet. We have an acquaintance or two up there. And then, she hasn’t been happy since we left Japan — doesn’t like the East very well, I’m afraid. Do you, Aunt Julia?”

Mrs. Holborow, frowning over the fine print, tossed her chin impatiently.

“No,” she said; then launched a thunderbolt. “All the men are bibulous, and the women devoid of ideas. Of course,” she added,

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glancing off the page, "the scenery is extremely — er — picturesque."

She ducked again into the cool depths of Walden Pond. Scarlett discovered that a pretty face can twitch into odd curves.

"You see, her friend Mrs. Bolton decided to stay with relatives," the girl explained. "After that I had trouble persuading my aunt to come on; but she finally gave in when we found we could take a reliable courier, to manage our trunks and plunder and things. He's a jewel, that man! Very good recommendations, and knows everything! My aunt approves of him, and she's hard to please. Aunt Julia!"

No answer came from among the pages.

"Aunty dear! Isn't our courier a lovey duck?"

Mrs. Holborow looked up severely.

"No," she informed them. "I wish you

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wouldn't be so silly, Laura. He's quite capable and obliging; but please don't interrupt me now, dear. I'm reading such an excellent thing. This 'Thoreau, the Man,'—it's so — er — suggestive, and — human, and — er — stimulating."

"Let's take a walk, then," the girl said promptly; and lagging somewhat in the drowsy heat, the two started off round the deck. She was very straight, with no seeming effort to poise; walked easily, without slatting her arms or whisking her skirts or thrusting her face forward; and, altogether, he thought, had the gait and action of a sensible girl. Several turns they made together, passing the loungers in the deck-chairs: Mrs. Holborow, still rapt and stimulated; a trim nervous Englishman rustling the sheets of the "Pink 'Un," whom Owen set down vaguely as the admired courier; a plump little brown Japanese, smiling toothfully

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at the dreamy universe; Borkman parting with jewelled fingers his sable-silvered beard, as he listened politely, but with mirthful eyes, to the earnest talk of a sallow missionary; and a rich Chinese merchant who, in a robe of black figured silk, sat reading with grave approval "The Swiss Family Robinson."

In this company they made the voyage, five lazy, shining days of companionship: cool sunrise hours when they met in wraps and sandals, to eat mangoes and watch the Malays scrub the deck with half-cocoanut-shells; noons of fierce heat smiting from the zenith, when the steerage Klings, in turbans of rainbow plaid, trolled for barracouta in a wake as of snow and bluing; and nights of veiled moonlight, when the wide gulf shivered with heat-lightning, at whose all-pervading tremor the lost horizon leapt forth black and startling. No marvel of sea or sky appeared to Scarlett as

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more than Laura's rightful setting and background. And speech, that to others had been flat and tedious, became to them as simple as the elements, potential as springtime, miraculous as revelation.

In those days they should have blessed "Thoreau, the Man."

On the last morning, when the azure Gulf of Siam was lost in the yellow outpour at Koh-si-chang, and crossing the bar, the "Prapatom" had steamed into the river, Scarlett and the girl stood together by the rail. They were silent, looking back to where, in the liquid light of dawn, the temple of Pak-nam rose from a fairy island, like the tall white helmet of a sunken genie. Slowly the ship moved up a river of molten copper, between low banks of vivid green bush and slim *areca* palms. From the bosky mouth of a hidden waterway, here and there, sampans stole out, — a lithe figure

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bent forward at the sweep — to break the green reflection with a curved long-bow of ripples. It was the season of the mango showers, and the breeze came heavy with perfume from yellow-burgeoning acacias. On the lower deck, Chinamen sluiced their sallow bodies with muddy water; soft-eyed Cingalese thrust in their round-combs; Malays knotted their bright *sarongs* for another day.

“All these will be scattering into Siam,” said Miss Holborow. “Isn’t it fun guessing where people come from and go to, out here? The East is a wonderful kaleidoscope in that way, I think — always changing, pictures, pictures, appearing, melting. . . . Do you know, sometimes I’m a little afraid of it.”

“I know,” said Scarlett, and was silent. Eight years of China had left him little fun in that sort of guessing. At Bangkok, all these

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particular sights would vanish: this girl and her aunt would, like the rest, depart into memories. They would join their friends, he would languish among strangers, and all his valiant, hare-brained stratagem would come to nothing. That would never do.

“Miss Holborow,” he began in a resolute voice. “Please don’t be offended.” His tone made her look up quickly for an instant; and for that instant he floundered in a new and singular confusion. “You’ll think it very odd, and blunt, and. . . . Well, I’ve seen you three times, twice by chance. But for all that. . . . By George, it won’t do to have you go disappearing here in Siam. The world’s terribly big; especially the East, where you lose your memory: people and things drop out of sight everywhere, and *maskee!* — but for friends. . . .” He stopped, ashamed of this foolish floundering. Meantime she looked at

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him, so frank and so puzzled that the absurdity of it all overpowered him.

“Let me be honest, anyway,” he continued, laughing. “I’ve not the shadow of any kind of business up here. I was heading for Europe, in general, and when you said the other evening that you were coming up, — why, I lied and came, too. . . .”

There fell a rather long silence. Below on the deck, the black fans of the coolies fluttered, brown legs stirred uneasily on the matting, a two-stringed fiddle was wailing, and from behind the ventilator-cowl a sing-song voice chanted an endless improvisation. Metallic thunder resounded along the ship, and a bare-foot Chinese boy pattered past, beating the breakfast gong with a skilful, rubbing stroke.

“We’ve been good friends for a time,” said Owen, in conclusion, and then smiled. “It’s best not to have been so on false pretences.”

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The girl searched him through with one bright, incomprehensible look.

“I think,” she declared slowly, “that you’re a very honest, funny — Boy. Very funny! Didn’t you see, you couldn’t dog us round the world in this way?”

“Couldn’t I?” he answered stubbornly.

“No,” said Miss Holborow. “My aunt would never allow it, for one thing.” They laughed, and moved away towards breakfast. “If you hadn’t told me all that —” she stopped abruptly — “I knew you were very honest, when I saw you at the devil-fishes.”

When the ship had anchored in the racing Me-nam, and the howls of coolies and bumping of sampans announced the hour of disembarking, Scarlett paid his farewell compliments.

“And a pleasure for us, too,” the little spinster-like matron averred, as if it had been a vote, not wholly of disapproval. “I hope we

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may happen to meet again somewhere. No, many thanks, our man is seeing to our luggage. Good-bye, Mr. Scarlett."

"Good-bye," said he, and answered the girl's smile; but it was gloomily that he swung down on the forward deck and picked out his trunks from the heap.

"I'm an ass," he thought, and gave almost savage directions to the hotel boy.

Near by, Borkman of the glowing eyes towered calm above the confusion. In cream-coloured pongee, with a diamond buckle on his watch-strap, he surveyed the trunks, choosing among them with a silver-mounted stick of polished stingaree. "Those b'long my, eight piecee, catchee that house, chop-chop!" he commanded, giving the coolie a written card.

The stingaree rapped down sharply on the canvas trunks marked "L. H."

Scarlett stared in wonder.

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“I am an ass,” he repeated. “Never guessed it, never asked Her —”

From the bridge-rail above, the Captain—a purple, sarcastic cherub in the pea-green halo of a sun-helmet—was forgetting the presence of ladies.

“Can’t you see?” he roared. “You’ve fouled the bloomin’ stanchion? Be-george, you’re as nimble as that bird they call the elephant!”



CHAPTER TWO

CHITS AND CATS



CHAPTER TWO

CHITS AND CATS

Owen let the launch go puffing to the land, bearing with it — a white figure among the bow cushions — all the good, all the gain of the Orient. He stood and formed a plan.

At the foot of the bridge-ladder he found the Captain, mollified by the happy effects of epigram, oratory, command, and a *stengah* with the Customs Officer.

“Good-bye, sir, I’ve had a pleasant voyage,” said Scarlett; and when they had shaken hands — “By the way, what’s wrong with that fellow Borkman? I meant to ask before —”

The ruddy little Captain rested his gaze upon the spire of a distant *wat*, and meditated, as if the secret were impaled on the pinnacle. “His damned ubiquity, for one thing,” he as-

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serted, in a voice of slow, tolerant conviction. Then, as his glance came back to the deck, his eyes flashed: "Wrong? Why, the fellow's a rotter! A confounded waister! Shouldn't have allowed him aboard my ship, sir! What the devil do those ladies let him tow round after them for, eh? Biggest bloomin' rascal in the East — notorious! Ask Newton about the elephants on his teak concession, or poor old Gatcomb how he lost his billet, over one scheme. Was an I. D. B. in Kimberley once, they say. Bah! —"

The Captain meditated again.

"You seem to know them — nice girl, too . . . Put them 'near,' as you Americans say. He's working some squeeze or other now, mind you —"

Beside them there bobbed up an umbrella of yellow paper, glossily varnished, from beneath which a pigtailed *compradore* in claret-coloured robes peered up at them with slant eyes and

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oily brown smile. The Captain turned on him viciously:

“And here’s another squeeze! What do *you* want, eh? Money, money — good God, what a world! See you later, Mr. Scarlett. Just now we’re in a perfect hurrah’s nest. . . .”

Vague as the testimony was, it sufficed for Scarlett. Duty had linked arms with desire, and his heart was fixed. No rotter, not even the mildest waister, should be allowed to guide the Holborows so freely and flagrantly. The sampan that sculled across the brimming race of the Me-nam carried an indignant champion and his luggage.

From the dwindling steamer, the Captain trumpeted through his hands — “Did *me* in the eye for Four Hundred Ticals!”

For the next few days Owen went diving hopefully into the dark interiors of *wats*. Whole afternoons he waited there, an impatient lover

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blinded with hot illusions, confronting the mystic smile of the soft-gleaming Buddhas, who sit aloft, forever peaceful, rapt in the timeless dream of the infinite. In courtyards, seated upon squat Chinese dog-lions who guard the rolling pearl between their teeth, he passed uncounted Eastern hours, while the breeze rustled the tamarind pods, and set the little golden bells tinkling along the temple cornices; till the level sunlight stole upward, from the vermilion flowers overhead, to the threefold, fang-pointed gables, the glistening roofs of blue and chestnut tiles, the highest golden spire of the *prachadee*. He loitered at the royal stables till the white elephants wearied of saluting him; he stood inanely watching the Siamese nobles fly their star-shaped kites over the Premane ground; he drove sadly along the empty reaches of the King's boulevard. But he caught no sight of aunt, or guide, or girl.

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At last he became a known visitor at the counters of shipping-clerks, and between-times, a solitary sitter in the hotel garden. He felt both silly and desperate; but at least that ill-sorted trio should not sail down the Me-nam unobserved.

On a hot, lonesome day, as he sat on the little platform which, from the shade of high-arched, breezy almond trees, looks across the racing copper flood to the teak-mills, he was roused by a heavy step and a cheerful hail:

“Oh, there you are, eh?” Borkman, clothed in white, resplendent with gold tical buttons, sat down and grinned across the white-painted disc of the little tin table.

“Looking for you all over, Mr. Scarlett,” he said. “Nice hotel this — I’m staying at a livelier place, though, myself, if you understand me. Go up to *their* house every morning and

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report. Good fun! Got a chit here that ought to please you!—O Boy, *dua stengah*, Scotch and Tansan. Where the mischief *is* the thing?”

He fumbled through many pockets, his deep-set eyes beaming kindly. “Miracle what rubbish a man stows away in his poche. Nice girl that, Miss Holborow, eh?”

From a pocket-book he dumped a small heap of paper scraps on the table, and began sorting them. Two or three he read smiling, and tore up. “Drunk again, Giles Borkman,” he commented, leniently, to his *alter ego*. At last, seizing a fresh white envelope, he pushed the remaining scraps aside. “There’s her chit,” he said. “No need of your writing. Just reply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ by me — Here’s fortune!”

“Fortune!” echoed Scarlett, happy and eager. He touched the glass to his lips, set it down, and opened the letter:

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DEAR MR. SCARLETT:

My aunt and I go with the guide to the ruins at Ayuthia on Thursday morning, and come back by launch in the evening. If you can come too, we shall be very glad. The Admirable Bearer will bring your answer by word of mouth. I hope you can come.

Yours sincerely,
LAURA HOLBOROW.

Can't you help us buy a Siamese cat this afternoon? We pick up the A. B. at your hotel, four o'clock.

"You'll come?" said Borkman, who seemed to have grasped the situation completely. He gave the young man a benignant smile, and the faintest flutter of a wink,— at once impudent and paternal. "That's good. The ladies will be pleased, eh?" He rose with the air of one who ends an audience. "Thursday, then? Train at 7:40, you know. Right-oh! Good-bye, my boy." And he swaggered off across the clean sand of the little garden.

Scarlett was left to discover that this pernicious waister had hobnobbed with him, patron-

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ized him, suggested that his dearest secret was an open one, and yet made him uncommonly happy. At least, while he read the note again, he could harbor no ill-will.

A puff of the cool afternoon breeze sent the forgotten papers flying into the river — all except three bits which fluttered to Scarlett's side of the table. He stopped them mechanically. One was a *gharri* chit, in marvellous English, from Nawab Shah's livery stable. The second was a chit from Sin Cheong, "Goldsmith or Curio," across which was written in a crabbed, boyish hand, "It is in the middle one. They are following you." "Sounds like melodrama," Owen reflected, idly. The third was a paste-board ticket bearing tiny Japanese characters, a telephone address, the name "Ko-Katu," and a street number notorious throughout the Orient.

"He's a savoury person for a guide," thought

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the young man, with indignation. Had it not been too much work, he would have formed moral reflections on woman's judgment of character. Instead, he puzzled once more over the situation: "A man covered with gold tics and diamond watch-strap buckles is not of the courier type. What's his game?"

He found no answer; and Borkman, when he reappeared later, stalking large in the river-garden, did not enlighten him. At the same moment wheels rattled in the road, and a victoria drew up at the verandah-end, with a flash of white through the sunny leafage.

It was she! it was also Aunt Julia: from one, a radiant, all-rewarding smile; from the other an indrawn chin and bird-like nod: and Owen found himself perched on a half-seat facing them, while Borkman, cracking a whip, led the way nobly in a high Tum-Tum cart with a Waler.

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The ponies scampered along the New Road, clattered down a row of Chinese shops in Sam Peng, and out along the old city wall, where they shied at an elephant plodding to his bath. Scarlett neither marked their course nor knew that they were in Siam: he was with Laura Holborow again, hearing her speak, meeting the glance of those honest eyes where mirth lived and moved, like swiftmess playing over depth. After an age of dumb sloth, he was restored to life, to speech, to joy.

“. . . Very interesting indeed,” Aunt Julia was expounding, “especially to see and study Buddhism at home. With all their tolerant innovations, they seem to have kept the purer, primitive beliefs, such as —”

“Do look!” cried Laura, eagerly. Below the road stretched a canal, empty at ebb-tide; and in a sampan on the flat waste of filthy ooze, a little Siamese, trousered in a yellow *panung*, lay

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supine, pointing a flute skyward and blowing pastoral notes. Laughing together, these two young people never listened to pure and primitive Buddhism.

Mrs. Holborow was naturally somewhat acidulated.

“This is a very silly expedition that the guide has persuaded you into,” she told Laura. “The cat will be a great nuisance, and I dare say a source of contagion.”

“Oh,” said Scarlett cheerfully, “there’s not much plague or cholera here now.”

“A little would be quite sufficient,” replied Aunt Julia, stiffly.

Presently their driver swerved after Borkman’s whiplash round a corner, and pulled up behind the Tum-Tum in a crowded bazaar that reeked of betel, burning joss-sticks, Chinese tobacco, frying lard, and green drainage. Their burly guide, scattering ducks,

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pariah dogs, and black sows, dived under a monstrous Chinese lantern, and led the party into the dusk and disorder of a pawnshop. On his platform beside a tall glass case of silverware, a young Chinaman, naked to the waist, sat braiding pink threads into his queue. He stared at the ladies, and coiled the half-finished strand about his neck.

Borkman presented a hieroglyphic letter, which the pawnbroker read slowly through horn-rimmed spectacles, whispering to himself, and spacing off groups of characters with a long blue thumb-nail. Meantime the booth was penned in by a chattering crowd, both Thai and Hainanese, gathered to watch the bargain; while imps of children, smeared as with yellow ochre and dressed only in heel-bangles or silver fig-leaves, gleefully skipped in pestilential dust.

The pawnbroker gravely finished the painted

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scroll, nodded, grinned — his mouth gaping blood-red with betel — and snarled something over his shoulder. A mysterious scuffle rose in the back shop, and presently a neat-bodied little Luk-Chin woman came clambering over a heap of brass-work, hugging three rebellious cats close to her kerchiefed breast.

Poured sprawling upon the platform, the cats tried vainly to bolt, then sat ruffled and indignant, darting side glances of sullen light.

“Isn’t he a beauty?” cried Miss Holborow.

“Careful,” Scarlett warned her. “Don’t admire. Let me do the bargaining; may I?”

“The big fellow is the only one to buy, sir,” Borkman advised. Before the ladies, his manner seemed unnaturally subdued, his genius rebuked. “Don’t buy the little ones, Mr. Scarlett, that’s all. The big chap would fetch fifty to a hundred pounds in London, as he stands.”

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“But the two small ones are blue,” said Mrs. Holborow, forgetting her general objection in a particular. “And the King has officially declared that blue cats are. . . .”

“Oh, Aunt Julia,” cried the girl reproachfully, “just see the other. He’s a dear.”

The dear uttered a “Yaow!” of unearthly volume, and stared up with the ice-blue eyes of a goblin. He was not of the royal hue, but fawn-coloured, with seal-brown face, paws, and tail, bat-ears, and bristling moustachios of snow-white.

“He heard me!” said Laura “I must have him.”

“No enthusiasm,” commanded Scarlett. “Let me.” Then, turning to the Chinaman, who sat in a fine oblivion, smoking a Malacca tin pipe like a long-spouted silver tea-pot:

“*Ni teng ha,*” he said, and pointed to one of the blue cats. “*Miu chai gi dō?*”

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“*Yit ba bat,*” sang the pawnbroker, with a quick gleam in his beady eyes.

“*M-hai!*” Owen laughed in scornful good humour. “*Ngō gin po guai a!*”

Negotiations ceased. Scarlett turned airily and surveyed the crowd outside.

“What did you tell him?” asked Miss Holborow, amused.

“I asked how much can catchee this cat,” Owen replied. “He wants a hundred tics,—absurd: so I told him to lower his price. Don’t be impatient.”

The coolies and the children gaped. One tall Chinaman, who had looked feverishly intent, turned about tactfully to await the renewal of the bargain, presenting an oily brown back.

“Hallo,” said Owen. “See that, Miss Holborow.”

Between the muscular shoulder-blades, in

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Siamese fashion, was tattooed a circular design in blue.

“An old friend, isn’t it?” continued Scarlett. “The symbol of Creation, the Dual Powers — two whales rolled together to form the world — as you see them on the Korean flag, the Madura praus, the Northern Pacific Railroad, and everywhere. He’s not a Hoi-how boy.”

The pawnbroker suddenly resumed the chaffering.

“*Ni! Ni!*” he cried vehemently, suspending by the scruff of his neck the fawn-coloured cat, who squirmed and clawed like a dragon. “*Ni! Mau! Gi dö?*”

“*M-hai,*” Scarlett shook his head indifferently. “*M-sē-nē.* No wantchee.”

The Chinaman returned calmly to the blue “*miu-chai.*” And so the bargain tossed and wavered, while the chuckling crowd muttered

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gibes. At last Scarlett changed his mongrel speech to English:

“Well,” he said, “you can buy the big chap for forty ticals. He’s an unusually good one—probably stolen. But before you close the bargain, I must tell you that it’s a risk: they often die going Home, they’re quarantined in London, and probably not even admitted by our delightful authorities in New York.”

Laura’s face clouded, but Borkman came to the rescue.

“It’s not so bad as that, sir,” he declared cheerfully. “I’ll see to him. Get him home for you with no trouble whatever—absolutely. If Mr. Scarlett is afraid, I’ll buy him on my own responsibility, and you can get him from me whenever you like, Miss Holborow.”

He had drawn himself up tall, a bearded protector of ladies.

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“He’s the boy to carry cats,” whispered Laura to Owen, behind Aunt Julia’s back. Borkman caught the buzz of the whisper, and for a second his eye gleamed with an odd suspicion. Then he repeated, amiably — “It’s quite safe.”

“The whole affair is absurd,” said Aunt Julia. “We have too much stuff already. A cat is a — a beast.”

There was no gainsaying this.

“And I foresee, Laura,” she continued gloomily, “this will be like those white rabbits that you begged so for when you were little, and that I had afterwards to feed.”

“Oh, Aunt Julia,” laughed her niece, “what a memory you have! But it was only for a week.

. . . ”

Owen saw that this discussion tended beside the point.

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“I may be wrong,” he admitted. “And if Mr. Borkman thinks he can —”

“Oh, absolutely,” boomed the courier. “Perfectly simple. It’s too fine a bargain to miss.”

“Then I’ll take him,” declared Laura quickly, opened her purse, and closed the argument.

The Chinaman grinned, by a sleight of hand passed the bank-notes apparently into his belly, and rejected the blue cats headlong into his wife’s apartment. The fawn-coloured hero sat staring with ice-blue eyes, haughty and intellectual.

“Isn’t he a lordly creature?” said the girl, sitting down beside him on the platform. “What shall I name him? Something that’s big and dignified” — she mused — and Siamese. . . .”

“Call him Chao Phya, then,” suggested Owen.

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“Good! Just it!” she exclaimed. “Come, Chao Phya! Come to Missy!”

The new member of the peerage stared coldly, cried an amazing “Yaow!” and suddenly leapt upon the girl’s shoulder.

“There!” she cried in triumph. “He’s purring already. The little old dear!”

“Excuse me a moment,” said Borkman, “I’ll be back directly — if you will please wait here?”

As he stepped out into the glare, he bumped against the tall Chinaman of the tattooed symbol. “Look out there!” he snapped. Then suddenly they saw, from the shop, his whole frame struck by some change, and his clenched fists quiver. The coolie was slinking away; and as Borkman wheeled half about, his eyes flamed with rage. It was a new face that they caught sight of, and not a pleasant one to remember.

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“Out o’ the way!” he roared. “What thing you do here? You wantchee catch bamboo-chow? Vamoose!”

The Chinaman meekly disappeared in the crowd. Borkman turned and stalked into a dark alley across the bazaar.

“Why should he abuse that poor coolie so?” Miss Holborow wondered. “I never saw him lose his temper before.”

He was gone a noticeable time, but reappeared all sunshine.

“I saw a little curio in a shop the other day,” he announced, smiling down at them with benevolent respect. “I was reminded of it just now, and — er — made bold to get it, Miss Holborow, as a present to Chao Phya. I hope he’ll accept it.”

He handed over a silver collar, hung with three rather large bells, fluted cockle-shells that tinkled musically. It was wrought with raised

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figures of men and elephants, in a maze of lotus-leaves.

“Lao work, from a bracelet,” he explained. “It makes a rather good collar, and I had Sin Cheong’s man put on ‘Chao Phya,’ while I waited.”

Mrs. Holborow was drawing on the dignity of an employer:

“Why, Mr. Borkman,” she began, “you know we can hardly . . . ”

“We can hardly thank you enough,” cut in Laura, with a dangerous glance at her aunt. “It’s beautiful work, and — and a great surprise. See, it fits His Highness as if made for him!”

The paternal Borkman beamed on her as she thanked him once more.

“Almost as well,” he agreed. “And now if you wish to see that Wat of the Lotuses, it’s time we were going.”

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So they left the pawnbroker braiding the pink threads into his pigtail, and crossed the viscid drain to the street. The light streamed level down the white vista of shops. Chao Phya shook his silver bells in Miss Holborow's lap, the *sais* shouted at the opium dreamers in the road, and they drove off through a double line of yellow coolies, each shouldering twin baskets like scales of justice and streaming past at a stiff-kneed, wincing trot.

Beyond the town, the race-course and the plains lay flooded in sunset light, and the shafts of betel palm against the west stood black and slender, like the crossed lances of a crowded squadron. The sight-seers alighted before the gates of Sapatomawan, where a carved and gilded bridge spanned a *klawng* brimming with great pink lotus chalices, and broad green leaves, stiff as bronze-work. When they had halted on the steps of the temple, it was already

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twilight; the bodies of kites roosting in high branches showed dark and indistinct as clusters of jack-fruit. And through the temple doors came an increasing light, as an old priest in saffron robe, the tiny flame of a taper in his shaking hand, moved among the leaping shadows of the sanctuary, from lamp to lamp, before the golden-glimmering Buddhas.

Even Borkman's voice became an undertone, as he stood expounding to Aunt Julia the doctrine of the Fully Enlightened One:

"The Hinayâna church differs from the Mahâyâna on those points above all. And yet curiously. . . ."

From a safe distance behind them, Laura, stroking Chao Phya's head, pursued a train of thought broken only by two miles of space and a hundred varied sights:

"I had to accept it," she whispered to Owen;

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“and he meant it well, but — why do you dislike him so?”

“I’ve said nothing of the sort,” retorted the young man.

“I can tell you what you think,” she replied from her meditation. “Our friends here, Mr. and Mrs. Sanders, wonder where we got him, I can see. But what’s wrong? He only looks like the King of Spades with his hair cropped. And Aunt Julia is *fond* of him!” A moment of silent mirth overcame her; then she looked grave again. “What do *you* think he’s up to?”

Scarlett shook his head. “It’s — it’s absurd!” he said. The futility of his vague, hearsay evidence irritated him. “I only wish I knew.”

“Yaow!” remarked Chao Phya, and jingled his silver bells in the dusk.



CHAPTER THREE

THE LURKER IN THE RUINS



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THE LURKER IN THE RUINS

The barefoot guards saluted the lordly foreign bust framed in the window of a first-class compartment; Borkman, graciously returning the salute, raised a heavy black tamarind stick, tipped with *kerbau* horn; and as if at the great man's signal, the little train rolled out from the station, out from the bush and palm environs of Bangkok, into the cool, fragrant, dazzled morning on the open plain. With a parting tally of tiffin-baskets, he modestly retired to the next compartment, and left his employers with Scarlett.

“Hello, Chao Phya,” said the young man. “I didn't expect you'd be coming.” He falsely patted the beast, which lay on the leather cush-

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ion beside Miss Holborow, in the attitude of a sleepy Royal Bengal.

“The guide’s frightened me about him,” she answered. “He says we mustn’t let him out of our sight here, he’d be snapped up so quickly; and he says the pawnbroker may try to have him stolen: it’s his regular trick, to sell him again.”

“What ‘he,’ and what ‘him’?” demanded Mrs. Holborow, acutely. The same white *topi* that made the niece a young Pallas helmeted, made the aunt a grimly sporting *zenana* missionary. “That’s quite the most careless and confused speech I’ve ever heard, even from you, my dear.”

“Now don’t pretend, Aunt Julia,” said Laura mischievously. “Of course, one ‘he’ is my big dear” (she hugged the seal-brown head) “and the other is — yours.”

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Aunt Julia smiled; she was in a good humour this morning.

“You must confess he is a remarkable man,” she replied. “He looks quite vulgar at first, but really shows excellent qualities: well educated, very respectful—I begin to wonder how we ever obtained such a man.”

“An unusual chance,” said Owen dryly. Laura gave him a look full of ambiguity.

Gradually, as the heat grew stronger, their talk languished into a silence, drowsy and companionable. The train jolted northward over the glaring buff plain of Lower Siam,—once rice-fields, now split and parched surfaces of sheet-brick that wavered through tremendous heat—to where, on the horizon-line, scorched palms straggled along an invisible river. Sometimes—beside the garish box of a station, or by a clump of stunted rubber trees with glossy leaves shining, in the vast

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scene of drought, as though miraculously wet — the train jarred to a halt; set down from the happy third-class pens, little chattering village men and women, to file slowly away, gay-breeched in pink and yellow *panungs*, and bearing burdens erect on cropped heads; then jolted northward again in the growing glare. Sometimes they passed a wretched rain-pit of brown water, brightened by a half-dead lotus, where down clay-cut steps clambered the Rebekahs of a dozen thirsty hamlets; or passed a small oasis of wet mud, which the roar of the train frightened into an oozy upheaval, as a smeared and shining buffalo reared from his wallow, dripping clods, like some new-born beast in the Miltonic picture of Creation.

Chao Phya and the three travellers were all dozing, when Borkman called through the window:

“Your station, madam: Ayuthia.”

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From bank to bank of the sharp-gabled village they crossed the copper Me-nam, in a boat whose thwarts and roof-posts were polished by generations. A handsome young Dane, in a white tunic, spurred, belted with a sword, saluted them on landing. All was ready, he said, glancing admiration at Laura; he regretted that his duties prevented him from serving them as guide. And again the lone officer saluted, gravely, when they trotted off on his ponies, from headquarters of the mounted *gendarmerie*.

Borkman, with Chao Phya at his saddlebow, led them along the silent, stifling, brown-burnt paths of the jungle. The split clay underfoot exhaled heat; the palm fronds overhead reflected heat; on either side, tumbling heaps of brick — outskirts of the ancient city destroyed by Burmese, and now worse racked by jungle creepers — reverberated heat unbearable.

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“It’s a perfect stoke-hole,” sighed Miss Holborow.

“You — you — w-would come!” gasped Aunt Julia. She jolted on, flushed, awry, patient, like a saint enduring the trials of both Mazeppa and Abed-nego. “You would c-come, L-Laura!”

“There!” cried the girl suddenly, as they swung round a bend.

Indeed, she was right to wonder; for before them, in a waste of fallen walls and broken spires, rose the ragged, tree-grown, pillared ruins of a temple; and among these, roofless, throned above climbing growth, sat the gigantic Buddha, outlined by incandescent gleams of bronze, smiling majestically from out his eternal thought. The walls rent and overthrown by the wild fig, “Splitter of sepulchres”; the year-long crumbling of stout *prachadees*; the green bush growing on the shoulder of the Holy

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One: all measured the duration and marked the repose of his dream.

They were dismounting, when Laura cried in a startled voice:

“What was that?”

“Where?” asked Owen, beside her.

“Behind that wall. Some one dodged out of sight — Just then —”

Owen strode forward, but saw only a pair of bare feet whisk round the corner of a distant thicket.

“Some native,” he laughed. “He had a worse fright than you.”

Borkman had gone ahead with their coolie.

“Tiffin-basket here, I take it, madam?” he inquired, returning. At a glance he had chosen the only possible corner in the stifled clearing — a ruinous archway, under which the travellers found both shade from the truculent sun, and a draught of air, in faint, hot

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breaths, of scant relief. Their coolie had hardly set down his baskets, before Aunt Julia was drooping beside them, propped against the ancient wall.

“Well,” she panted, “this is a preposterous, preposterous —” words and breath failed her. “I would not stir,” she declared feebly, “for all the Buddhas of the Five Worlds.”

Laura knelt beside her in some anxiety; but her next remark was reassuring:

“Don’t crouch and stare in that undignified posture, like a native! The time for any solicitude was before we started — before you dragged me out on this preposterous —” Again she found no word sufficient.

The tartness of her tone made Chao Phya regard her gravely with his goblin eyes. He stretched, rubbed himself against the wall in a slant, voluptuous curve, and lay down at the edge of the shadow in the doorway.

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“After tiffin we shall all be livelier,” said Owen cheerfully. “It’s been a hard pull in this heat.”

Borkman was busily opening the baskets — the picture of a genial comedian playing at butler.

The tinkle of soda-bottles, and the harsh crackle of dry palm-tops in the hot breeze, disturbed the dreamy noon. Suddenly, loose bricks rattled down close by in a scrambling rush —

“Oh, stop him!” cried Laura.

In the doorway glare, a pair of yellow arms made one desperate thrust, seized the dozing cat, and vanished. Owen caught the flash of a muscular back and the switching of a black queue.

Both men leapt to the entrance, slid break-neck down the steep rubble. But with a flying start, the thief had ten yards law; and gaining their feet on solid ground, they saw his saffron

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back and blue trousers vanish into a clump of bamboo. Scarlett plunged through it next, Borkman at his heels. Guided by the crashing ahead, they fought their way as it were through a white-hot furnace stuffed crisscross with dry stalks and rasping leaves, a tangle burning to the touch, but incombustible and tough to penetrate.

Borkman swerved to the right.

“No, no! This way!” cried Scarlett, and held his course, plunging and tearing. Straightway his chase grew confused, his hearing puzzled, deceived by twofold sounds of crashing: which was the Chinaman’s flight, and which the guide’s pursuit? He panted on, blind and dizzy with the heat. His temples throbbed as if to burst.

Suddenly he ripped and fell through into a clearing, just in time to see Borkman dive into the opposite side, well to the right.

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“He may have struck it,” thought Scarlett, as he ran through the open. The thief could have cut across to any point of the compass; all trails were now equal.

Nevertheless he pounded across, doggedly; pierced again into the smothering jungle; wrestled through a wall of thorn bushes; tripped, fell, rose again, and stumbled forth into another clearing, with face and hands bloody. The futility of the chase flashed upon him so clear and sudden that he stopped, swore, mechanically listened. The Chinaman might be hidden, chuckling, in some thicket far behind; or far to their left, be speeding down a free jungle path. The parched crackle of palm fronds continued, sharp as the rattle of carriage wheels. His thorn cuts smarted with salt sweat. Once — if it was not the dizzy thumping in his ears — a strange, gabbling cry sounded, away to the right. He tramped wear-

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ily in that direction; shouted, listened, shouted again, but with no answering sight or sound.

“Foolishness!” he muttered, angry and chagrined. “Wouldn’t run in this heat for twenty coolies with twenty cats.”

Yet when he had scouted fruitlessly for Borkman, and through the bewildering sameness of jungle and ruins had toiled back to the archway by the great Buddha, it was with a downcast face that he reported failure.

“Lost him,” he said, gloomily. “Stupid.”

“What a shame!” said Laura. “You’ve run till you’re half dead. Good-bye, Chao Phya! It’s all my fault for bringing him. You poor man — but there’s blood on you!”

“Thorns,” he explained. “Perhaps the guide has caught him.”

Aunt Julia roused, with a weary stir.

“I hope not,” she said grimly, and again collapsed.

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“Did you notice the thief?” asked the girl. “It was the same native we saw lurking behind that wall—Our guide was right, wasn’t he? Chao Phya was too good for us to keep long.”

It was a tedious time before footsteps crunched without on the heap of powdered masonry. Scarlett and the girl sprang to the entrance. Red as with apoplexy, smiling, flourishing his big tamarind stick in triumph, up marched Borkman, with the cat clasped to his ample breast.

They applauded, but he bore his honours meekly.

“My word!” he puffed, “that chap could run! Yes, Miss, he’s safe and sound, not a scratch.”

“But you’re not,” exclaimed Laura. As he restored Chao Phya to her shoulder, the palm of his left hand showed raw and bleeding.

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“I say!” he cried, in a curious tone of surprise. “I am flayed a bit, eh?”

“You must have run through Mr. Scarlett’s thorns,” said the girl.

“Of course!” he boomed. “That was it. ‘Jumped into a bramble-bush!’ Well, rather!”

He returned to the tiffin-baskets as though nothing had happened.

“Did you — I hope you didn’t hurt that poor thief,” Laura continued, stroking the ruffled cat.

“Er — no,” said Borkman over his shoulder, as he stooped. “Er — by Jove, the ice has gone *futt* — clean melted. I dropped it in the sun. Why, that chap got away clear, Miss. He *could* run, if you like. Saw game was up — dropped the cat — off like a shot. This heat, too, poor devil — my word, he ran!

The excitement over, he became once more a subdued professional guide and handy man,

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gravely serving their tiffin of limp sandwiches and tepid soda. And when Aunt Julia had revived, he led her out, incongruous under a wide umbrella, to confront the Dreamer in the Ruins. The hum of explanation came drowsily to Owen and the girl.

Their pretext — of hunting for small Bud-dhas among the rubbish — led them slowly out of ear-shot. Prodding into likely or impossible corners, happy to be together, they encountered awkward, expectant silences, which neither knew how to break. From above crumbled walls, and parching screens of jungle, the bronze face of the Dreamer smiled with downcast eyes, as though they too appeared in the illusion of Forms, along with so many past phantoms — war and worship, growth and decay, other lives and loves — so many eager shadows flitting imperious and futile across this solitude.

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“Aren’t we wandering rather far?” asked Laura. It was not the subject uppermost in her mind.

“We’re not lost,” replied Scarlett. “This is the way we chased the coolie.” It was not at all his uppermost thought.

They dug listlessly, in silence.

“Mr. Scarlett,” began the girl resolutely. “I’ve thought over what you said aboard ship.”

“So have I,” said Owen, in great relief. “And been thoroughly ashamed. You’re very good — I didn’t hope to see you again after that — and — and —”

“It *was* rather a cheeky thing to do, wasn’t it?” Her tone was cool, her blue eyes shone with uncompromising candour.

“No two opinions about that,” he admitted ruefully. “Just brazen cheek.”

To his surprise, she laughed clear and joyful.

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“That’s what I like. You don’t make excuses and — and that, but just own up nice and squarely.”

“So it’s all right?” said Owen. They faced each other, radiantly. Flies hummed in the tense, quivering stillness. “Then I’ll do it again — for another reason —”

His tone was dangerous. Laura started on, quickly; they turned the little promontory of a ruin; and what he wished and feared to say was forgotten.

It was here that the flies were humming. Close under the wall, half covered by vines burnt hard as wire, a man sprawled prone — the Chinaman, dead, with a clotted knife-wound in the back.

Owen whipped in before the girl.

“You can’t do anything here,” he commanded. “Let me. Wait round the corner there.”

With a queer catch in her breath, she obeyed.

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Owen stood staring. He had seen violent death before, but this —

Just above the knife-thrust, on the broad, sallow back, showed in blue tattooing the Dual Powers, the convoluted Symbol of Creation. This, then, was the coolie whom Borkman had menaced outside the pawnbroker's shop.

Gently, in a nausea of repugnance, he turned the body over. As it rolled limply on its back, something scratched his hand. The queue bristled with long, sharp pins. Oil shone on the naked chest. Scarlett whistled thoughtfully: "Came prepared, didn't he? Regular burglar's make-up." The Mongol face, more inscrutable even than in life, gaped at the blazing sky, idiotic and daunting. He had been run almost through the body, pierced as if by a lance.

The stout belt-purse had been half wrenched away.

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“May as well be thorough,” thought Owen; and kneeling, he opened it. A poor handful of silver coins, *salungs* bent in some gambling-house, clinked within; and among them lay a pasteboard ticket,—third-class, Bangkok to Ayuthia, stamped with that day’s date, punched and forgotten by the guard. He had followed them to these ruins: to steal a cat, and meet his death. Why?

Why indeed? The thief sprawled among the vines, tawny as the lifeless ground, agape, mysterious, inaccessible.

There was nothing more to do. Retreating slowly from the rebuke of that presence, Owen turned the corner of the wall.

“Come,” he said. They moved off among the ancient mounds, the air before them dancing in blurs of heat. The girl shivered slightly, paused as for breath:

“Was it—?” she whispered. “Did he do it?”

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“No,” said Owen, as though she had named the guide aloud. “No, I hope — I think not. The wound — you see, he couldn’t carry such a weapon, — a spear or a long dagger. Couldn’t conceal it. No —”

“Oh, he wouldn’t anyway!” she cried. “But — what shall we do?”

“Say nothing to him,” he replied slowly. “Report — *gendarmerie* headquarters. What else?”

In silence, they gained the temple and the archway. Among the baskets Chao Phya and the coolie bearer dozed together; Aunt Julia and the guide were returning at a distance.

“Remember — don’t show that anything’s up,” whispered Owen.

It was a silent company that jogged back to the living Ayuthia. Aunt Julia’s one comment expressed the general desire: “Let us go back to civilization as soon as possible.” So Bork-

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man cantered on ahead to see that their launch should have steam up. At the outskirts of the village he cantered back again, calling:

“To your left, please! We’ll ride straight to the landing. I have boys to take the ponies home.” He swung before them towards the river.

“Very thoughtful, isn’t he?” sighed Aunt Julia. “But we should thank that kind young officer.”

“I’ll go,” said Owen. He had already reined about.

In the verandah of barracks the young Dane looked up from inspecting Mannlicher carbines. Handsome and impassive, he saluted, bowed gravely to the message of thanks.

“But there’s another matter,” continued Owen. “Out there in the ruins we found a man killed, the dead body —”

“Ah, yes,” interrupted the Dane slowly.

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“That coolie — We shall find the place, thanks to your — ah — most accurate description. It is nothing to retain you more long, no? Some quarrels of thieves. However, allow me your address, as a favour; it may be well.”

“So you *knew* already!” cried Scarlett.

“Naturally.” The young officer smiled. “Your — ah — courier reported just since. He found the body, and willed to refrain alarming the ladies; is it not? I go investigate shortly.”

Scarlett rode down to the river with his chin on his breast. As their launch slipped down stream, in the level light that flamed through the silhouette bars and tatters of palm-groves, he remained silent and thoughtful. Crowded among cushions at the bow, they had no room for secrets.

The great tide turned in flood, making the launch labour slowly; the cool darkness of the

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East fell at a blow; and the easy slumber of the East at last overcame the tired women. Yet now and then they woke, with weary murmurs of delight, at some picture fleeting past: a tug whipping up-river an endless string of rice-boats, each with a ruddy fire that lighted up the brown legs of a squatting circle, and each leaving a pungent wake of cookery and sour betel; the bellying whiteness of a lateen sail, swan-like, unreal, seen and lost in a moment of ghostly moonshine; splashes of lamp-light wriggling deep in the river pools below some floating bazaar or open house-boat, where, as if kneeling on the water, black profiles of Chinamen threatened each other, chattering at *Chai-mooey*, the coolies' game of forfeits. All these passed swiftly in a dream, measured by the monotonous, happy chant of the steersman, and heavy with the perfume of acacias.

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When the other two slept soundly, Owen leaned toward Borkman.

“What was all this?” he whispered. His glance, in the lantern-light, was hard and severe. “What did you tell them at *gendarmerie* headquarters?”

“The facts, of course,” said the guide readily. “Strange business, wasn’t it? Saw directly by Miss Holborow’s face that you’d found him. Well, that’s the way I found him, too — dead — and the cat perched on the wall. Lied to them, obviously. Silly to frighten women about it, eh? What? Much in the dark as you. My dear chap, I’d give anything to know —”

The young man leaned back again. Perhaps, then, his thoughts had wronged Borkman; but if they had, what was all this tangle? What stratagems, what violence, could centre in the absurd figure of a cat? He must puzzle out the problem. But athwart his first efforts came the

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thought of Laura, the flutter of her breathing beside him, to confuse and erase his reasoning.

“This much is good,” he thought. “If there is danger to her, I’m to be in it.”



CHAPTER FOUR

BLINDMAN'S-BUFF



CHAPTER FOUR

BLINDMAN'S-BUFF

Mr. Sanders, a florid little man, accurately dressed for summer evenings in England, hopped down from the Holborows' carriage and came trotting back through the hotel garden.

"I say," he chirped, "Mr. Scarlett! Won't you come dine with us to-morrow night? Ah, good! Very glad. Surawongse Road. Right! Good-night again."

And so their expedition ended. Midnight had passed, but Owen had no desire to sleep. Calling for ice, soda, and cigars, he stretched out in his verandah chair, and stared blankly down into the moonlit compound. Banana leaves drooped in pennants of hoary silver; the tin roof of a go-down shone like snow; a

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coolie, sleeping in the dust, scowled upward, with the shadowed sockets of a death's-head, into the pale radiance. Now and then a pedlar's bell clanked faintly; a gust of laughter told where sea-captains drank late under the almond trees; or breaking the charm of stillness, a lizard cried: "To-kay! to-kay!" in a voice dogmatic and hiccoughing.

"I can't believe him," thought Scarlett. "He seemed plausible there in the boat, but —" Instinct declared the man a liar; reason tried to marshal the facts both for and against him:

"First of all, Borkman suggested buying the cat. That proves nothing, either way. Second, he knew the thief before — bumped him in the bazaar — and was *not* glad to see him. Third, grabbing the coolie by the queue, as he ran, would rip his hand exactly as it was ripped. But then all those thorn bushes — I

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can hardly shut my own fist. Fourth, Borkman's story is improbable. If an unknown person — a second thief, an accomplice — fought and killed the coolie, then why leave behind the only apparent cause of quarrel — the cat — perched on the wall? But he may have heard Borkman coming, or have seen him, and cut and run. After all, that seems the most likely way; for Borkman could have no accomplice stationed out there to do the killing, no such weapon to do it with himself. Fifth, *if* Borkman were the murderer, then his remark — 'I saw directly by Miss Holborow's face' — was made when off his guard, and explains why he reported to the Dane. Humph!

"If there had been a weapon," thought the young man, "I'd be certain: or if it were anything but a cat —"

Muffled hammering at doors sounded in the distance, and the raucous singsong cry of a

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runner from the lottery, shouting the lucky number for the night. Dawn was near, then; Owen rose wearily, and crept under his mosquito netting, to sleep over the whole blind puzzle.

He woke to find himself still thinking of the courier.

“Borkman started all this cat-pidgin; he knew where to buy, had a letter to the pawnbroker—” What a long, empty day, before seeing Laura at dinner! “I’ll spend it,” he decided, “looking in on this devious gentleman’s friends.”

But even starting early after breakfast, he wasted most of the morning before he found the pawnbroker’s shop; and then was rewarded only by the gory smile of the betel-chewer, and a furious exhibition of undesired cats.

“No go,” he thought. “This chap doesn’t

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savee anything. No can do, my friend. Finish! Put your beasts back. We'll try the collar man." He entered the stone-flagged alley, to find that every other door revealed a goldsmith's shop. "Lim Chong, Chin Leong — what was it? Sounded familiar, too. But they're all alike. Here it is — Sin Cheong."

In the dusk, on clean matting, stood glass cases full of shining wares. Behind a lamp-lit counter, a jolly fat merchant sat clicking his abacus. He looked up, nodded, grinned. "*Tsu s'n*," he remarked affably; then called aloud for his assistant. Through the rattling strings of the curtain, slid a sleek young Chinaman in pale green silk pyjamas. His face was glossy, keen, guileless, like that of an intellectual babe.

"Ho Kong," explained the merchant, "He speakee Ingalis, my no can do."

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“Good-moh ? ning-seh,” chanted Ho Kong, “I hop you ? ah velly well. You wantchee buy nice golo-smit culio, I can ? show you, seh.”

The slant, thick-lidded eyes watched every movement, as Scarlett peered along the cases. In one corner lay a silver bracelet, which, but for having no bells, was the mate to Borkman’s gift.

“How much is this ? S’pose you put bells on, how much ?” Owen looked squarely into the clerk’s eyes. They met his with a strange gleam, but not a curve changed in the fallow, infant face.

“Fiftee tical, he velly nice.”

“This chap *does* savee,” thought Owen. “Fifty — say that means twenty: the cat was forty. Do men kill each other over sixty ticals ?” Aloud he said — “Too much. What price this silver casket ?”

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He bought a few things, handled many more, called for a list of prices. Ho Kong the clerk, rattling the abacus, jotted down figures on a sheet of paper, which he folded trimly, and delivered with a bow. Then, clapping on a rakish Panama hat, he escorted Owen to his carriage, and as it rolled away, bowed again in best European fashion.

“I startled him about that bracelet,” thought Owen. “The writing on this price-list looks familiar, too. Where could I have seen it? Hmm! So he comes into the affair, too; but *what* affair?”

The drowsy afternoon lagged by, the sun dropped behind the teak-mills, the brown smoke of twilight swiftly turned to darkness. At last it was time to dress for dinner. Returning to his room, he switched on the swinging bulb just in time to see, on the back-verandah rail, a pair of green-sleeved arms re-

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lease their clutch and drop out of sight. He ran to the edge. In the dim light, a plump figure under a Panama hat slid down a post, and flitted across the compound into darkness.

“Young Mr. Ho Kong returns his calls promptly. Heard me direct the driver, of course. What has he stolen?”

The wardrobe door stood open, a coat lay on the floor, the lock of his trunk had been picked, and there were other signs of recent and hurried search. Nothing, however, seemed to be missing. On the table lay a letter, printed in English with a pencil, on hotel paper.

TO HONOURABLE ESQRE :

I beg to inform Your Honour should be leaving Cat in this room tomorrow all afternoons complete from tiffin till dark-times and leave same here all alone. Cat do not came out, remain all right very good, can do harmless. Your Honour catch him coming back inside. Leave cat, enjoy days, long life much jade best wishes. Suppose you do not, then some mans have got hurt become kill Your

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Honour, become kill your Honour's girl, very sorry. I write this to obliged for you nextime.

Yours triily, and complete servant,

CHRISTIAN FRIEND.

N. D. Now, suppose you go, tell another mans look-see watch room, no good. Undersigned will kill Your Honour I think all same.

“My Christian friend,” chuckled Owen grimly. “They teach them well at the missions — So unless I give you a private interview with the cat, you will regretfully kill me and —” he laughed — “‘Your Honour's girl.’ By George, I wish she were! Whatever he wants, this chap is making a rather silly bluff.”

He dressed hurriedly, and after a short drive, reached Mr. Sanders's house. Not before coffee in the verandah — when the ladies were talking of Home, and the men betting whether the French would give up Chantabun — did he get free speech of Laura. Lamps on a long table divided them from most of the company.

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Her first words out-valued all she had ever said.

“I’ve waited the whole day to talk to you,” she said guardedly; “Do you know, I’m getting — rather afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” he asked.

Leaning forward, she answered the question with another.

“Did you hear what Mr. Sanders told at table, about our burglar, — that his Sikh watchman chased some one out of the compound last night? Well, I could have told them more. What do you think? Last night I couldn’t get to sleep, after all that happened in the ruins. So perhaps about three o’clock I thought of wandering out into my verandah to watch the moonlight and find a breeze. I stepped out through the door quickly, and almost ran into a man — a Chinaman. He was creeping in, bent over — didn’t even stop to see what I was,

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just bounced away and down the verandah stairs."

"Plump, was he?" asked Scarlett. "Wear any sort of hat?"

"No," she reflected. "Little — thin — bare-headed. He ran lame but very fast. At the front of the stairs there, another popped up, and both men ran off together. Then a third jumped out from that shrubbery. That was the only one the Sikh saw, for just then his turban came bobbing round the corner. He didn't catch any one."

"Haven't you spoken of all this?" whispered Owen.

"Not a word. Because — because I wanted your advice first, somehow. You see, that wasn't all. Just before the Sikh appeared, another man, a European, stepped out of that shadow by the wall." Laura pointed to a far corner, densely blurred with flamboyer branch-

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es and tall crotons. "He was big, very tall even crouching; he ran forward a few steps, dodged back until the Sikh passed, and then stood out an instant watching. I can't be sure: but the moonlight was like day, and he stood there so broad, with his feet braced apart — you know — yes, like our courier Borkman. He held a sort of staff in one hand, and the end flashed bluish, like steel — a sword-blade or a spear-head. But you don't look surprised."

"I'm not," said Scarlett dryly. "Where did the cat stay last night?"

"In my room," replied Laura. "Then you think, too —"

"Had you always kept him?" he interrupted.

"Why, no," she answered. "Last night was the first time. The guide had always taken care of him. But last night when we landed, Mr. Sanders said, 'Bring him along to show the

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children to-morrow.' I remember the courier objected, and Mr. Sanders snubbed him for being impudent."

"Miss Holborow," said Owen, gravely, "It sounds foolish, but I think it's dangerous for you to keep that beast. The burglars came here because he came. Whether Borkman sent them, or whether he stood on guard against them, I can't tell yet. The entire affair is blind-man's-buff. But one thing I begin to see: wherever Chao Phya goes, there'll be trouble."

"I won't give him up now," she declared, with the pout of a spoiled child. "But we can't fill Mr. Sanders's house full of Chinese burglars, can we? Please tell me what to do?"

"Promise me one thing," he answered. "When you engage passage back to Singapore, tell me; and let me take the same steamer. Our friend the King of Spades is not the safest of guides. Does your agreement let you dis-

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charge him here? No: well, that might not be wise, anyway. You promise? Thank you — Then, let me take Chao Phya home to-night, and keep him. No, there's no danger, in a hotel full of people. So that's settled; and now, tell Mr. Sanders privately, without fail, just enough to show that you were frightened last night. So that he'll have a boy or two sleep in your verandah and the Sikh on close watch. Good!"

Mr. Sanders peeped waggishly round the lamp.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, "I thought it was very quiet this side! Mr. Scarlett, you've forgotten to drink your *stengah*, and we're on the second. This is bad!"

Scarlett had man's natural contempt for cats; but as he lifted Chao Phya to the carriage cushions, he felt not ungrateful to this solemn, green-eyed puzzle.

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From the verandah Aunt Julia called down in astonishment —

“Are you taking him?”

“Yes,” he laughed back. “Miss Holborow lends him. A friend of mine is anxious to see him. In fact, several men — Good-night.”

Just how anxious, he was soon to learn. The moon still lurked behind the eastern palm-groves, the road was a gully of ragged shadows. Once or twice, as they rolled along it, he seemed to hear footsteps pattering swiftly.

“Hi, *gharri-wallah!*” he called. The bearded Mohammedan pulled up. “Who runs behind? We had no *sais*.”

The driver listened.

“Master, I think Ee-Sander Sahib send one man.”

But the sound had stopped. The carriage was slowly getting under way again, when some one dived in head first — a half-naked

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Chinaman, thin and feverishly spry, clutched once in desperation just as Scarlett swept the cat under his left arm. With his right he struck out heavily. The man toppled into the road, but rebounding like a ball, cleared the ditch, skimmed a hedge, and was lost. The Mohammedan lashed the ponies. They had galloped a hundred yards before Scarlett discovered that Chao Phya was scratching venomously.

“By George, that chap ran lame!” he thought. “Laura’s burglar: they keep a good watch. Now my troubles begin — but that one was harmless enough!”

Under the lights of his verandah, however, he decided otherwise. A ragged triangle of leather, wads of curled hair, flapped at his shoulder. An upward stab had disembowelled the back cushion. His fist had been none too ready.

“So Christian Friend was not bluffing,”

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he told himself, when at last stretched on his bed. "Chao Phya, if you could only talk!"

The cat, sitting beside Owen's feet, blinked sagely at the night-lamp with goblin eyes of changing fire. He yawned hungrily, jingled his silver bells, then in slow revolution trod out a lair and curled down to sleep. Owen lay wakeful; or dozing wearily, started at every flutter of bats without, every stir of geckoes on his chamber wall. But the pink mists of dawn glimmered at last through the doors: nothing had happened.

And although — mindful of Ho Kong's letter — he stationed boys to watch for prowlers, and kept his room all afternoon, the hours dragged by tame and empty.

"Beast!" he grumbled next day at tiffin. "This makes five meals in my room, all on your account. If I owned you, Chao my boy, I'd stop their nonsense — wring your neck.

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Keep out of my curry. Scat! You and your absurd collar both aren't worth sixty tics." He examined it idly: the silver was thin and light, the workmanship curious but crude, the three silver cockle-shells — their edges slightly parted to make resonant the tinkling pellets within — were fat and clumsy. "No," he repeated, "in harness as you stand, Chao, not sixty. Hallo, what's this?"

With his *gula* the boy Ah Ling brought in a basket of golden mangoes. Mr. San Dass sent them by bearer, explained Ah Ling: "Name card no have-got."

"Sanders, eh," said Owen, choosing the most luscious. "He's a brick! These are Number One Gold Chop mangoes." He sliced one, and had raised the first spoonful to his lips, when Ah Ling laid beside the plate a letter addressed in a hand which drove all else to oblivion. He tore it open and read:

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DEAR MR. SCARLETT:

Aunt Julia has just decided that we go by the "Muang-Fang," sailing to-morrow. The climate is getting too much for her, and the King of Spades *urgently advises her to go*.

All quiet here these last two nights. I hope it has been so with you.

In great haste,

L. H.

"Hurrah!" cried Scarlett. Clapping Chao Phya under his arm, and leaving both *gula* and mangoes untasted, he hurried down to his carriage. Just as he had booked for the "Muang-Fang," and was leaving the office, he ran against a round little man, tight-buttoned in cheerful flannels.

"You here, too!" exclaimed Mr. Sanders. His red necktie lent a needless touch of heat to the torrid compound. He waggled a roguish finger. "I spy, I spy! Same steamer, eh? You sad young dog! *And* the cat — now I call that devotion, if you like!"

Owen reddened.

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“I’ll try to look out for them, sir. You see —”

“I don’t blame you,” chirruped the older man. “Never leave a defenceless aunt! Lucky chap . . . Youth, youth!”

“And Mr. Sanders,” interrupted Owen stiffly, “Let me thank you for the mangoes. They’re capital. . . .”

“Mangoes?” The little gentleman frowned. “What mangoes?”

“Why, the basket you sent me this noon, sir.”

“No fear!” cried Sanders, jovially. “Not I. I’ve not seen a decent mango this season. Mangoes? You’re in luck, but don’t thank me. . . . Why, I’ve been pining for them this fortnight,” he lamented. “You’d have been the first, my dear chap; but I couldn’t have spared you a mango now, if I had one.”

A sudden idea made Scarlett a poor listener to the rest of the little man’s chat. On

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reaching the hotel again, his first act was to stuff two or three mangoes into his pockets. A friendly chemist in the dispensary stared at his request, disappeared smiling into a tiny laboratory, and returned with a puzzled face, very serious.

“May I ask where you got these?” he said. “Anonymous friend. . . . Hmm! Quite right to be suspicious . . . Hydrocyanic acid, squirted full, permeated.” He showed, in a strip of the mango skin, a pinhole puncture. “Regular subcutaneous, you see. Prussic enough to kill an elephant, sir.”

“Good. Thank you,” said Scarlett, laughing. “I don’t die to-day. Some Christian friend will be disappointed.”

But once outside, he stopped smiling, and acknowledged the chill that had touched his spirit: death, the unreal and remote, had struck short by a fang’s breadth. “It was at

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my lips!" he thought, staring downward, while streets and shops reeled past the carriage like shapes in a dream. "I should be dead some two hours . . . but for Laura's chit."

That night he changed his room to the opposite wing, and from midnight on, paced bare-foot in the dark verandah. Between moon-set and dawn, a black shape swarmed up the post below his former quarters, vanished within, reappeared, slid down to earth. Two other shadows joined it, and moved off, whispering, towards the river. In the farthest corner of the compound, a bush gradually swelled, divided, threw off the shadow-bulk of a man standing on watch. Then noiseless, faint, like the last vestige of a thing imagined, it moved away slowly after the other three. For a second, crossing the smoky light of the servants' door, it focused as the silhouette of Borkman.

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When the little "Muang-Fang" next day swung southward from the fairy temple of Pak-nam, Scarlett heaved his shoulders as though to let slip all the burdens of a troubled kingdom. He was off, the Holborows were on board, and Chao Phya, by sufferance of an easy captain, lay in his lower bunk. Owen was about to lock him in, when he noticed that the cabin-boys had mixed their luggage. Among his bags lay an unfamiliar bundle of sticks, from which two had slipped out on the floor. One was the big black tamarind that the guide had carried in the ruins. As Scarlett lifted it, the knob of *kerbau* horn turned slightly.

"Idiot! blockhead!" he muttered, twisting and tugging. Something clicked, gave way, — and there in his hand, sliding from the polished wood, shone a bright sword-blade.

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Some one laughed behind him.

“Found it, have you?”

The guide, his heavy frame filling the doorway, smiled in mockery.

CHAPTER FIVE

ABOARD THE "MUANG-FANG."



CHAPTER FIVE

ABOARD THE "MUANG-FANG"

Scarlett, the naked sword in his hand, maintained an uncompromising stare. Hostile silence filled the little cabin.

"Well?" drawled the guide, at last. He combed his beard with steady fingers. "Well, what of it?"

"I think," said Owen coldly, "any further talk should come from you."

"Very good. It will," replied Borkman, with a robust air of generosity. "No reason why it should, you know. I'm not accountable to you. Only don't look so damned righteous and judgmental." He closed the door, and cramped his great bulk down on the lounge below the porthole. "Come, come," he laughed, "look natural, my boy. Unbend, un-

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bend! Take your mask off, every one else is unmasked, eh?"

"Cut out the humour," replied Scarlett, sheathing the sword grimly. "And spare me your friendliness. Straight facts or nothing."

"As you please." The guide lighted a Burmah cheroot, and sighed forth a blue cloud of smoke. "Be a prig if you like. I see you're in a frightful wax because I killed that swine of a coolie. But he'd have done for me if I hadn't. 'Dilly, Dilly, come and be killed' — that doesn't appeal to me. So I hit first, and — 'my vorpal blade went snicker-snack.' As you must have seen. Got the beast right enough. Finish! A good job, too. If we judge a man by his friends' characters, *you* ought to know that coolie was no angel. It's dry talking: just ring for drinks, won't you?"

Scarlett made no movement.

"Can't stoop to it eh?" jeered Borkman.

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"Murderers not good enough? Now look here, Mr. Virtue, I'll do some preaching on my own. I stuck that pig because I had to. You'd have done the same. It was kill or be killed. Young man —" he pegged out his emphasis with a heavy index finger; his face and tone were candid — "young man, towards you I've had no feelings but the most friendly. Yet you pull a frozen face on me, and treat me like a stage villain. Actually, I believe you think I've plotted against you with that Chinese gang. No fear! Why, they've kept me sleepless for four nights. Your *mafoo* told me the little lame Chinaman cut at you in your carriage driving home from dinner. Well, he'd have stayed and finished you if he hadn't known that I was running down the road after him. And last night, when those three went gunning for you in your bedroom: if I'd been on their side instead of yours, shouldn't I have told them

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that you'd changed quarters to the other wing? That was a sensible move, and gave me genuine pleasure. Genuine, by Jove! You see I've watched you closely, and as a friend."

The deep-set eyes met Owen's without shift or tremour. Something in their light, as in the man's voice, told that he could not be altogether lying.

"But why," objected Scarlett, "why have you dragged these ladies into danger?"

"Accidental, dear chap!" cried the other eagerly. "Pure accident. I'm as sorry as you."

"Can't know when you *are* telling the truth," growled Scarlett. "So what's the use of asking you questions?"

"Now is that a pretty speech?" complained the courier. "You've never tried me. Put some questions. Come on."

"Well, then, what the devil is all this fuss?"

ABOARD THE "MUANG-FANG"

Why do you chaps poison and stab people for the sake of a cat?"

"Poison?" echoed Borkman. He whistled softly. "So they tried that on you, too. Hmm! Now you ask why, Mr. Scarlett, that's a hard question — a complex matter. You see, this cat—" He pointed to Chao Phya, who sat in the bunk describing half-circles of ablution round his ear, with a puffy paw bent like a boxing-glove. "This particular cat happens to be a kind of sacred animal. A secret society —"

Scarlett jumped up and flung open the door.

"That's enough!" he cried angrily. "Stop this baby-talk, and get out! I can't sit stewing in here over nonsense!"

Borkman rose laughing. His opal eyes twinkled merrily.

"There you are," said he. "The moment I do try lying, you bowl me clean. I'm no ex-

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pert, my boy, and you're no fool. Now honestly, I can't tell you the real facts just yet; but will this do? I prevailed on the old lady—pardon me: Mrs. Holborow—to come away for her health. *That* was true, for the place was getting too hot, in every sense. We're all absolutely safe now. And I give you my word that when we reach Singapore, I'll explain everything. Show you the whole bag of tricks. Come now, that's fair."

They stumbled out over the high threshold, for the ship had begun to scend in a rising sea.

"That's fair," repeated Borkman. "You couldn't force me to say a word, you know. But I like your style."

Scarlett gave an unsociable grunt:

"Needn't bother, unless it's the truth."

"The whole truth, when we land," replied the big man, cheerfully. "And mind you, we're not in the slightest danger now."

ABOARD THE "MUANG-FANG"

This seemed to be the case. In fact, for two days Owen found the voyage dull. On that first night, the growing gale sent the ladies to their cabin; and as the "Muang-Fang" staggered out from the shelter of distant Cambodia, the grey waste of the South China Sea rolled full sweep in howling onslaughts. By day, Owen watched their slow fight southward through whirling rain and smoking wave-crests; by night, he see-sawed, half-awake, on a *charpoy* lashed beneath dripping canvas. Here he woke in a dismal dawn, to find that the courier was mistaken.

A figure in a long yellow oilskin coat flapped by, shouting:

"Get out, ye *suar!* Below with you! Can't speak your lingo, can't I?" A glistening rubber boot kicked out mightily. Something soft thumped the lower deck. "Perhaps you'll savee that!" shouted the man in oilskin. He

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turned chuckling: it was the first officer, a light-hearted young Anglo-Indian.

“Morning!” he laughed. “These coolies are *jungli* enough, aren’t they? Think the whole gory ship belongs to ’em! The beggar’d have nosed into your cabin if I’d not caught him.”

Scarlett reeled to the ladder-head. The fallen prowler crawled up from the slewing deck, clutched a hand-rail, limped aft under the double awning. His dirty blue garb was that of a coolie, but his face the plump baby face of Ho Kong, Christian Friend and goldsmith’s clerk.

The courier, then, had undervalued their opponents.

That day—which, like all days without Laura, dragged through stale, vacant hours—Scarlett spent in planning. By night he had evolved a simple stratagem. Deserting his canvas bed on

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deck, he took to his cabin, and camped down on the little couch by the door, which he hooked back, invitingly open. Above his head was the switch for the light, and ready to hand lay his revolver. Chao Phya slept, tethered, in the lower berth.

"A little trap," thought Owen drowsily. "A trap for Christian friends, and Chao Phya as bait."

To his disgust it caught nothing. Only one night more, and they would be in port. An unprofitable voyage: the stubborn puzzle of their situation enraged him; and except for inquiries and condolence, he had had no speech of Laura.

The last night wore away, till something woke him from uneasy sleep. The creaking roll had ceased; the ship throbbed steadily on even keel; and beside his couch daybreak glimmered vaguely in the doorway. But it was

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not these changes that had made him start: some other stir —

He reached up cautiously. The knob of the switch clicked down. In the sudden glare, a kneeling man leapt upright: Ho Kong's slant eyes blinked at the black muzzle of the Webley. Then both men sprang for the door. Just in time, Scarlett hammered the butt on the shaven forehead, knocked up the brass hook, slammed the door. He had forgotten that to Chinamen a gun is no threat. With a straight punch he sent the thief whimpering to the floor: then from the forgotten bundle of sticks, drew Borkman's sword and held the point pricking the naked saffron chest.

“I should have remembered the cold steel pidgin first off,” he said. “Now, Mr. Ho Kong, speak up. What thing you wantchee? What thing you catch inside here?”

An anxious twitch wrinkled the baby mask,

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vanished, left it smooth, cool, intellectual. Pillowed on a snaky tangle of queue, Ho Kong stared upward in blank innocence. From the bunk, the cat glowered at them both.

"Chop-chop!" growled Scarlett. "You speakee!" He pressed the sword-point harder, twirled it slightly.

"Yai-eee!" squealed the thief. "Yai-eee! Please ik-scusse me! I b'long Chlistian boy! Bling *kim* off! I talkee You Honour all velly good!"

Scarlett maintained his pressure. The captive writhed.

"I-I come walkee here," he moaned, "wantchee catch him cat. You Honour please ik-scusse me. I hop you? — ah velly well. Cat he b'long my fa-tha. You savee fa-tha? You Honour fiend — big man, Bolkoman, he steal cat. My fa-tha he talkee my — 'Go

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catchee cat, bling back my house!' I b'long velly good boy. I go. You savee fa-tha?"

"No savee your father," grinned Scarlett. "Haven't the old gentleman's acquaintance. A filial son, aren't you? Now forget your father and give me the truth." He pricked a fresh spot between the yellow ribs. "You fashion speakee no good. No can do." He dropped into Cantonese: "Speak the truth, or I kill you with many cuts and pains. Remove this father-lie. Tell the truth quickly."

"True gold fears no fire," quoted the prisoner glibly. "Should Your Greatness transfer his treasures of jade to my hovel, he would find there much wretchedness, but the jewel of truth."

"Show it, then, before I slice you."

"Your Greatness knows I am a pauper," gabbled Ho Kong, clawing at Scarlett's feet.

"I am Chlistian boy. I can speak the Chlistian

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language, but yet I work for a few *cash* under the goldsmith's lamp. Sin Cheong is a hard master. The big man, your friend —"

"Go on," said Scarlett. "What of him? Borkman is no friend."

The thick-lidded eyes gave their first gleam of interest. The Chinaman sat up, fearlessly.

"Good. I hate him. He is a bad man. See now, here is the story. Many months, two rains ago, this big Bolkoman and Sin Cheong, my master, they were secretly partners. Your wisdom foreknows that the Phai-lin mines bring forth no good rubies, but chips and small rubbish. Very true: but *one* mine at Phai-lin of late gave birth to five, six of good size and value. No man knew this. Why? Because the coolies stole them secretly. My master and Bolkoman, they bought them all. With these hands I cut them, and Bolkoman took them forth of Siam and sold. Then one

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night came a Luk-chin man with such a stone as you have never seen — large, perfect as the Dragon's Pearl, red as the blood of doves. I lay on the roof, as always, and moving a certain tile, saw down into the room behind the shop, where the three squatted by the lamp.

“The Luk-chin thief would not loose that stone from his hand.

“‘Ten thousand ticals,’ he said. He breathed like a man in great fear. And it was worth seven times ten thousand.

“‘This is neither Phai-lin nor Krat,’ whispered my master. ‘This is Burmah.’

“The Luk-chin swore it was Phai-lin, by five generations of his fathers.

“‘It is Burmah,’ said my master softly; ‘*and* this man is a stranger here.’

“Bolkoman knew the fulness of that saying, and reached swiftly and caught the Luk-chin by the throat, and so killed him without

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noise. It was decorously unknown to neighbours.

"Then my master took down from the corner the God of Longevity. From the bottom of the image they cut out a cube of the soapstone, and thrust in the ruby, and sealed it with a thin shell of soapstone.

"But three other thieves had followed the dead Luk-chin, and now they watched Borkman, and my master, and the shop."

"Wait," interrupted Scarlett. "Was one tall, with the Two Whales tattooed on his back, so — ?"

"Your wisdom includes him," nodded the clerk gravely. "Yes, and two others, Ah Pin the Flat Nose, and Tau-p'úi the Pockmarked, who is little and lame. But your first man has gone — where?"

Scarlett nodded in turn. "Borkman killed him with this sword."

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The clerk held up two roly-poly fingers. "And he would have killed me for the third. *Maskee!* These three, then, hovered close as spirits, or the *Funiaio*. Sin Cheong, my master, has not left his shop once. Then also the policemen would have searched Bolkoman, for some other act of his wickedness, which is manifold. So he sailed away to the Straits, leaving my master to watch the Burmah treasure in the God of Longevity.

"Within this month he returned. He came as a great man, friend to wealthy women. May his house offend both the Green Dragon and the White Tiger! He bought my folly for a thousand ticals, that I should steal the stone, the dove-blood, the priceless. For my master would not give it up: 'Together we own,' I heard him say, 'Together we go sell. Not singly.' But he could not wake always. So one night, in the time it takes to drink a cup of

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hot tea, I pried it out from the image, and next day conveyed it out of the shop in —" Ho Kong's eye suddenly turned lacklustre, his voice indifferent — "in a cunning manner."

"Oho!" cried Scarlett eagerly. There flashed before him the memory of the wind-blown papers in the river garden, that afternoon Laura had — "Oho! *You* wrote that! 'It is in the middle one. They will follow you.' Then the ruby is in the middle bell —" he laughed aloud — "on the cat!"

"You know all things!" assented Ho Kong gloomily. His slant eyes held a curious gleam. "Yes, I wrote in Christian letters, — The middle one."

A glance at Chao Phya's collar showed the silver cockle-shells intact.

"Go on," laughed Scarlett. "By George! Go on."

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The ingenuity at once amused and angered him. Safely smuggled out of the goldsmith's shop; stowed in a place too incredible for search, yet always in sight, always easily watched: this stone, which already had killed two men, had weighted Laura with unknown responsibility and danger. A thief and murderer had made her his pretext of respectability, his stalking-horse and receiver. "He will pay for it," said Scarlett. "Go on."

"Then I asked for my money!" cried the clerk hoarsely. "He laughed, this big man! He said, 'Why should I pay you? Go ask your master. You are a fool!'"

"I saw this was true. First I thought, 'I will go kill myself on his door-step.' But he does not fear the evil spirits: he would only laugh. Then I thought '*He* shall not have the ruby.' So I told the Pockmarked and the other two. The tall coolie, you say, he killed. But we

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three followed the stone everywhere. Four times we tried to kill you, wishing the stone, and thinking you Bolkoman's friend. Please ik-scusse me. That is all. Now if you kill, push quickly."

In the silence, they could feel the slower throb of the engines, could hear the slush of water, the heavy dragging of hose, the patter of the Malays scrubbing deck.

"No," said Scarlett, at last. "Listen, Ho Kong. The stone belongs to a dead man, who stole it. It is no man's jewel. This liar, he has given it in the middle bell, to — to My Honour's girl. Good: she shall keep it. Write on this card your name and house. It is no trick. Fear nothing. Write."

The clerk, crouching, scrawled painfully against a bulkhead.

"Good," said Scarlett. "You have set me above this breaker of bargains. Now I shall

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make him the fool. He shall not see the stone again; and if it is as you have said, I shall send your thousand ticals to the Hongkong bank in Bangkok. You deserve only the bastinado; but this, perhaps, will square my conscience towards the dead man." He opened the door. "Now go, and never again come before me, for next time I also should kill."

Silent, placid, the clerk slipped through the door and flitted aft. Owen turned to the cat.

"Chao Phya, if what that fellow said is true —" He stooped to examine the middle bell. This fat shell of fluted silver might contain a treasure. But the fastening held strongly, the collar was locked on. "Borkman has the key," thought Owen. He could not bend or break the bell off, and the narrow slit showed only something that joggled and tinkled, and that might

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be pebble, or ruby, or child's marble. "I must get a silversmith to file it off."

He screwed home the shutter, locked his door, and on going to breakfast hired a Malay to stand guard. The ship lay anchored in Singapore harbour; on their port hand rose the city. The flat stretch of Collyer Quai, the low billows of arsenical verdure, slept cool and silent; but sunrise tipped the pale Memorial tower, and the signal masts on the hill.

Beside the breakfast table, already being laid on deck, Mrs. Holborow and Laura stood facing their guide, — all three, from heel to helmet, rigid with anger.

"That will do! That is quite sufficient!" snapped Aunt Julia, her voice trembling like a plucked bow-string. "Mr. Scarlett, will you please — Good-morning — will you please see us to our hotel presently, or at least to the Johnston Pier? And kindly inform this — this

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man that he is not to address me again. His wages we shall leave at the hotel office."

"Damn the wages!" roared the guide. "Look here, do you think —"

Scarlett's face was suddenly within an inch of his own. Both men were dangerously pale.

"You heard your orders," said the younger. "Or shall I repeat them, Mr. Jeweller?"

The deep-set eyes contracted evilly, met Scarlett's in a mutual menace. Without moving them, the courier spoke:

"Very well, Miss Holborow. Now I understand. Let your young man keep him for you. He'll be sorry."

Owen's arms tightened, drew slowly up from his sides. Borkman wheeled, and marched away aft.

"Oh, the — wretch!" cried both women together. Laura's cheeks flamed. Her aunt first broke the awkward silence.

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"That cat has been our bane," she declared with energy. Then answering Owen's look, "Laura said that you should have charge of him, and this — this fellow became, became — Oh, he *dared* speak so to us! Laura, this ridiculous beast of yours —"

Her lips narrowed into a line of precision.

"It shall trouble us no more," she asserted. "Hereafter, I shall look to it myself."

"But Mrs. Holborow —" began Scarlett.

"Not a word, please!" Aunt Julia bowed her chin taut home. "Let us drop this subject here. The cat, if we keep it, is in my charge."

CHAPTER SIX

THE LADY FROM MAURITIUS



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At breakfast, the captain's presence forbade explanation; and three times in the shore-going sampan, Aunt Julia herself forbade it in good set terms. Claspng Chao Phya beside her on the thwart, she sat as upright as her parasol.

"But I *must* tell you," urged Owen desperately. "You don't know the risk. That cat's collar has a —"

"Our luggage is all that I need trouble you about," she interrupted, frowning. "Please understand, Mr. Scarlett, that unless this silly and unfortunate subject is dropped, I shall be seriously displeased."

Her frigid air, her careful choice of words, and above all a stealthy glance from her niece,

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warned him that this prim little matron could prove a Tartar.

“Have it your own way, then,” he reflected. “Whatever else happens, I must keep in favour at court.”

It amused him to think of what a secret she had robbed herself. On the other hand, he was chafing for a look inside Chao Phya’s middle bell. Neither in sampan nor in gharri could he pass the word to Laura; and, hardly were they alighted at their hotel, when hateful strangers encountered them, and hailing the Holborows as old friends, carried them off in a victoria.

Owen, left alone once more, with directions to forward their trunks to the strangers’ house, watched that victoria depart, and found it, from twinkling wheels to jingling chains, from snowy turbans to polished hoofs, a needless and loathsome apparition.

His instructions, however, he followed faith-

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fully; and when leaving the courier's pay with the Eurasian clerk, ordered that whoever might call for it should not be told the whereabouts of the Holborows.

Next day, coming back to his room, he found Borkman seated in his best long-chair, smoking calmly, though with an aspect black and lowering.

"I like your cheek," began Owen; but the other leapt upright and opened fire:

"Don't give a hang what you like. I've come here to ask you just one question. Where's the cat, or where's my property?"

"In my keeping," replied Scarlett promptly. "Stowed safely where you won't see either of them."

"Knew you'd say that," sneered the courier. "Now listen. If you know as much as you appear to, you'll know enough to give up that — that thing. Leave it for me at the Chartered

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Bank by to-morrow noon, or whoever has it will be — in a mess, that's all!"

"That's all, then," assented Scarlett. "Good-day."

"I'm not joking," began Borkman.

"Nor am I. Do you remember," asked Owen, "what happened in that club at Cebu? It's going shortly to happen in this doorway, unless you go."

Scowling piratically, the courier looked back over his shoulder from the threshold: "I've served fair notice. Don't imagine I'm tamely going to give it up to that little flapper of yours. She'd better look. . . ."

Scarlett ran two steps towards him, and shot out his right foot with the skill of an old drop-kicker. It would have scored an accurate goal. With a shout of rage, the big man wheeled; but Scarlett's guard was up, and at that instant a squad of newly arrived Dutch plan-

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ters waddled round the corner of the verandah.

“Won’t take you on to-day, my boy!” laughed Borkman ostentatiously. “Some other time we’ll fight it out, eh? Chin-chin!” He swaggered off, waving gay farewells before the staring audience of Batavian crop-heads.

This episode made Owen far more cheerful. The kick, though he knew it had only further enraged an enemy, left him aglow with satisfaction. It was pleasant, also, to know that Borkman considered him still the guardian of Chao Phya.

He deferred his note of explanation to Laura: “no need yet,” he decided, “of stirring them up.” The courier’s threat he disregarded; and the next day, with the appointed noon, passed in tranquil succession of black, splashing showers and aching glare.

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On the second morning, however, as he lay smoking in the main verandah, a Chinese boy brought news at which his heart leapt. A lady wished to see him: and wild hope told him it might be Laura.

On reaching the carriage archway, he found a strange face smiling at him from the gharri window. A pretty and alluring face,— even to his disappointed vision: Italian in the darkness of the cheeks, Parisian both in the quickness of the black eyes and in the pointed, piquant contour, it was lively and mischievous as a kitten's.

“Is zees Mr. Scarlett?” she asked, with a smile at once dangerous and engaging. As she leaned forward, the stranger showed trim, youthful shoulders, and one sleeve of her shapely white jacket, ringed with the black band of perfunctory mourning.

“My friend Mrs. Hol-bo-row,” laughed the

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stranger merrily. "She has sent me to ask a so fonny question! It is zees: 'Haf you ze cat?' Is not zat droll! 'Haf you ze cat?'"

"Has she lost him already?" cried Owen in consternation. Next instant he could have bitten off his tongue. Suppose this joyful young woman had come from Borkman? Her next words, however, reassured him.

"No, no!" Her laugh was a mere delight. "Zat is a miss-take. You must pardon me. My home is not long in Singapore, but many years in Mauritius. I spik ze English tongue so ver' badly. But see. I would *not* haf said — 'Haf you ze cat?' I would say 'Vill you ze cat?' Zat is it."

She handed him an open envelope.

"Here is Mrs. Hol-bo-row's letter. But I must ask you first, it sounded a so fonny question!"

Owen drew out the letter:

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DEAR MR. SCARLETT:

I have a favour to ask of you. Will you kindly take charge once more of this wretched pet of Laura's? It seems foolish to ask, but recent events make me think it really unwise for us to keep it.

We are spending the day with Mrs. Fargueil, who will give you this note, and who joins us in begging that if possible you will come to tiffin with us. Laura and I have much to say to you, especially in explaining the apparent absurdity of our request.

Yours sincerely,

Flamboyer Villa,

JULIA HOLBOROW.

Thursday Morning.

“You will come to ze tiffin?” begged Mrs. Fargueil, smiling radiantly. “Ah, zat is so näice! I send zees carriage for you, a little after noon.” Her parting glance was so lustrous as to border on coquetry.

“That is a gay bird for Aunt Julia to flock with,” thought Owen. “Glad she’s getting reasonable, at last, about Chao Phya. I wonder what has happened?” The more he studied the letter, the more plainly he saw that Aunt Julia had had a fright.

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The carriage called for him promptly, in such a drenching equatorial downpour as made him keep the shutters closed. Between the slats he could catch glimpses only of pink roads flooded, pools lashed with upward-leaping drops, and now and then the stout sallow calves of a *rickshaw* coolie splashing past on the jog-trot. He was nearing the outskirts of the city, in the general direction, as he guessed, of the impounding reservoir, when the carriage swerved between gate-posts, followed the long curve of a drive thick-set with dripping shrubbery, and stopped beneath the white arches of a verandah. Substantial but damp-stained, Flamboyer Villa — to judge from a hurried glance — stood in a dense little wilderness of tropical greenery. A white-bearded *durwan*, Biblical in robes and turban, salaamed gravely at the foot of the stairs.

Owen mounted gaily, hoping to see Laura at

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the head; but the verandah was empty. A table with a tray of bottles stood near the rail. Except for this and a few rattan chairs, the place was meagrely furnished; the pillars were patched with rusty mould; and missing the swing of the *punkah*, Owen looked upward to find the bare ropes dangling.

“Pardon ze ap-pear-ance,” said a soft voice behind him. The lady from Mauritius, smiling mischief, stepped forward into the verandah. “It is all in ver’ great des-ordre, is it not? Ve are pre-paring for ze paint. What a mees-er-able r-rain! You vill haf a *pahit*?” She mixed the gin and bitters skilfully. They drank together, the lady pledging with coy, Jonsonian eyes.

“Oh, I am forgetting,” she cried in arch dismay. “Mrs. Hol-bo-row, she spiks wiz you before ze tiffin.”

With what, in Anglo-Saxon glances, would

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have been an ogle, she led Scarlett within the house again, and held aside the curtain from a doorway.

“In here, please,” she cooed. “Mrs. Hol-borow comes directly. Pardon ze darkness — zese mees-er-able clouds!”

She vanished with a look which made the young man consider. “By George, she *is* pretty! But if she weren’t Aunt Julia’s friend, I’d say she almost made eyes at people.”

He stumbled into a chair. The room was black as midnight, damp, and airless; he could neither see nor feel the stir of any *punkah*. Gradually, as he sat in this funereal darkness, the two windows glowed brighter, till a faint yellow gleam told of sunshine without: faint, because heavy green reed curtains, barred with wide vertical stripes, thickly veiled both windows. Through them glimmered the white

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columns of the verandah, a few slim, vermilion shafts of sealing-wax palm, and, on the trees that gave their name to the villa, broad burgeoning of arterial red.

He waited a long time. The sepulchral air of the room, the dead silence marked by the tiny scratchings of lizards on the plaster, disquieted him strangely. "Aunt Julia takes her time," he thought. The more his eye-sight cleared in the dusk, the less inviting loomed his surroundings. The few draperies lighted by the dim glow, took on a tawdry look; the knick-knacks were common Japanese bazaar stuff; and the scragged plants stood in Chinese pots of the cheapest ware. From the table he caught up a paper to flap as a fan. The frontispiece looked familiar; the heading . . . it was a *Graphic* nearly two years old.

Misgivings seized him: something was wrong with this house. His watch showed that he had

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waited half an hour. He stepped towards the entrance, pulled aside the curtain, and bumped against a smooth door of heavy teak-wood — closed and locked.

Disgust was his chief emotion : he had proved such an easy fool. “This charmer from Mauritius,” he thought savagely, “first she pumped me, then had me walk into her parlour — or Borkman’s. I wonder what for? — especially as the windows are open.”

He crossed the room, thrust sharply outward at the heavy reed “chicks,” and nearly broke a finger. What had seemed vertical bands on the curtain were iron bars, newly set in, with all the neat solidity of Chinese workmanship. Even as he rose from a vain attempt to loosen them, past the window glided the noiseless figure of a brown Malay, from whose waist-knot stuck the handle of a *kriiss*. It was a stout trap, and well watched.

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Vexed with surmise, he went back to his chair and waited. Borkman, it was plain, had worked methodically. "First he claps me in jail here. What's the next move?" Evidently it would be against the Holborows. In vague and conflicting anxiety, he outwatched the drowsy afternoon.

At last the floor above creaked stealthily. In the upper chamber, voices murmured. Without a sound, Owen climbed on the table, stood upright, listened.

"But he is just below!" expostulated a sprightly voice. The lady from Mauritius had lost her foreign accent. "It will not do."

"Have to," grumbled a surly bass. It was unmistakably Borkman. "Do you suppose . . . afford to hire every villa in Singapore? . . . *must* be in here. Where else? . . . Nonsense . . . Let him shout, then . . . no one within quarter of a mile

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. . . troublesome, I'll jolly soon stop his mouth . . . And another thing, Justine, . . . do the respectable better than you did . . . I saw you . . . can't stop making eyes at the men . . . No! rot . . . I tell you it must be in here. . . ."

The grumble died away; furniture grated lightly along the floor just over Scarlett's head; then cautious footsteps departed.

The voices had sounded so clear that Owen looked up involuntarily; and now for the first time he saw that the discoloured whiteness overhead was no plaster, but a ceiling-cloth stretched taut over the beams.

"Hello!" he muttered, "if only . . . It's a bare chance." Whipping down from the table, he seized the tallest chair in the room — a solid piece of Chinese carving, cheaply inlaid — and lifted it to the table. Then climbing upon this, and gripping a loose end of *punkah*-rope

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that dangled from a hook, he slashed away with his big clasp-knife two good square yards of cloth. The cross-beams showed, over two feet apart. Enveloped in trailing strips of mouldy cloth, he stabbed upward at the floor-boards; then grunted in disappointment, for the knife-blade stopped short in seasoned wood, hard as iron.

“Take all night for it, then,” he thought, and jabbed again and again, doggedly.

Suddenly the blade ran up, as through cheese, the hilt jarred softly home, and left his hand powdered with dry dust. “White ants!” he whispered, rejoicing. A few slashes carved out a long meandering slit from beam to beam. The rest held firm, but here was a lucky start.

Peering up through the hole, he could discern only obscure light, beneath some smooth, dark surface which he could not explain. He paused for breath, tangled his left wrist thoroughly in

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the *punkah*-rope, and began to whittle along the slit. Stubborn shavings, one by one, fell past him to the floor. Sweat coursed down him, from forehead to ankles.

Night came on, but still he worked steadily, fingering the invisible edges. At last he could feel that of one wide board there remained only a strip at either side. These he was about to risk the noise of breaking, when the crunch of carriage wheels sounded in the driveway, brisk feet mounted the stairs, and to his dismay, voices murmured overhead, as if at the door of the room. A bright shaft of lamplight slanted down through the gap, and then, to the creak of footsteps that seemed to trample the very edges of the hole, became unaccountably obscured.

“It’s all up,” he thought, and hung by the wrist, waiting in despair. The sounds again retreated,—the neat tread of a single pair of

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feet, though in his confusion he had seemed to hear two persons entering. He waited anxiously. At the long-forgotten memory of hanging thus on straps in crowded cars, he felt a foolish desire to laugh.

Presently the carriage wheels crunched away again into the distance. The chamber above remained silent. Nothing happened. Half an hour must have passed.

“Here goes, anyway,” he decided, and tugged at one of the whittled edges. It snapped faintly, splintered, came down. He waited, then pulled at the other, which broke with an alarming crack. Cutting his wrist-rope, and seizing the new borders, he swung like a gymnast, kicked violently, and with a wrench of muscles surged up through the hole.

A sharp blow on the head dazed him. Some one gave a little shriek. He rolled over, expecting the next stroke of the same bludgeon to

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brain him, and found himself a-sprawl beneath a table on which a lamp still dangerously tottered.

Bolt upright in a chair, as if Medusa were to make a formal call, Aunt Julia glared at him with a Gorgon face of unbelief and wrath. She was the first to break their frozen stupefaction.

“Please explain, Mr. Scarlett. Why, after writing that incomprehensible letter, why have you kept me waiting while you lurked under a table?”

“I—I came up through the floor, you know,” he stammered, prostrate and guilty.

“Then your conduct is even more incredible.” The little matron bristled. “If you are given to practical jokes . . . ”

“Ssh!” warned Scarlett, regaining at once his feet and his presence of mind. “Please whisper!”

“I shall do nothing of the sort,” she declared,

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in clear tones and penetrating. "Whisper indeed! Unless you have taken leave of your senses, you will explain everything at once."

"Please, please," whispered Owen imploringly, "not so loud. It isn't safe. What *did* I write to you?"

"This, of course," replied Aunt Julia. With an air of patient contempt, she drew from her pocket a letter. He darted with it to the lamp. A good imitation of his own handwriting, it begged Mrs. Holborow to meet him that evening at Flamboyer Villa, to discuss privately "a matter of the gravest importance." He skimmed it, frowning. "Every reason to believe . . . serious danger to you and Miss Holborow . . . cannot explain in writing . . . absurd as it may seem, absolutely *imperative* that you bring the Siamese cat . . . shall send my *gharri* for you promptly . . . under no circumstances

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mention this to any one . . . not responsible for consequences . . . ” The signature, “Owen Scarlett,” was a capital forgery.

“Where is he?” asked the young man.

“Who, please?” inquired Mrs. Holborow, with the same cold, weary patience.

“The cat,” he explained. The word stung her into animation.

“That!” she exclaimed. “Really, that, Mr. Scarlett, was a length to which I could not go. No cat, or other dumb animal, could be necessary for any discussion whatsoever. It was folly enough to come here at all.”

“You left him behind?” cried Scarlett incautiously. “Good! Good!” With joy, he pictured Borkman raging; but on the heels of that thought followed another which startled him. Borkman would not give up so easily — and Chao Phya was now with Laura.

“We must get out of here.” He spoke with

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curt conviction. "I never wrote this letter. The man you discharged has concocted it. He brought me here first, by forging this note from you."

With a growing flush at her outraged identity, Aunt Julia scanned the invitation to tiffin.

"No, indeed," he assured her. "Of course you never wrote it. It fooled me, however. They locked me into the room below, to keep the coast clear for deceiving you. I broke jail — there!" He pointed to the pool of darkness under the table. "Borkman is a dangerous man, and his next move he'll make against your niece. The carriage drove off immediately after you came — without Chao Phya. We'd best make for home at once — if we can get out."

"By all means," replied Aunt Julia. Though her flush gave way to pallor, she rose quiet and ready, a prim little mistress of her feelings.

Their captors had counted on bewilderment,

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in a lonely house of unknown environs, to keep the second prisoner secure; for the room was not so much as curtained from the long corridor. They stole out, crept down the stairs, stopped, gave ear to the dead silence, crept down again safely to the verandah floor. By the newel-post sprawled a Malay, drugged with sleep. Through the bare hall a cool evening draught bullied the flame of the hanging lamps; the strip of matting rose along the floor; except for the sedate, humdrum figure of Aunt Julia, their escape recalled the flight of the fabled lovers on Saint Agnes' Eve. Down-stairs again to the doorway they stole, past another sleeping Malay, and so out, free of the arches, free of the dim lamplight on the gravel. . . .

A voice shouted, — the *durwan* was giving the alarm. "Run!" cried Scarlett. He caught the swish of reefing skirts, and there beside him bounded Aunt Julia, with the speed, if

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not the grace, of Atalanta. They raced together through the blurred shadows of tropic starlight. As the ghostly form of the gate-post shot behind, a hard patter of bare feet followed them, gaining.

The highway, overarched, ran to their left as black as a tunnel. To their right, far off, the orange radiance of a street lamp lighted a dim fringe of theatric green. He seized his companion, swung her over the ditch, and pinning her against the outer face of the compound wall, whispered fiercely: "Quiet! Let them pass us!"

Three shapes, breathing hard, swept by towards the light.

"Now, then!" he whispered; and facing about, led the way into the darkness opposite. They stole ahead, stopped, listened, hurried on again, caught suddenly, to the right, another distant gleam, and plunged towards it, down a

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soggy lane. Already they could see the black column of the lamp-post and the flat shine of a broad road, when once more the pursuing feet pattered down the lane behind them. Spurting headlong, the two emerged on a broad, well-lighted road. A stone's throw along it, like a row of stationary fireflies, twinkled the lanterns of a *rickshaw* stand. Instantly the two nearest *rickshaws* wheeled out, came trundling to meet the fugitives. The coolies dropped their brass-bound shafts; Scarlett lifted Aunt Julia to one seat, and shouting "Scott Road!" swung into the other; then, as the coolies caught their balance and jogged off, he saw, over his shoulder, three Malays dart from the mouth of the lane and stand at fault.

It was pleasant — with the grateful breath of motion cooling his cheeks — to jog homeward down the humid vista of overhanging foliage, or under the starry marvel of open sky.

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Yet Owen's thoughts tugged forward. If Laura should be safe, then their luck held. If not — but he clenched his fists against that uncertainty.

Beside the gate into which their coolies veered, stood a carriage. Through the window, as they spun past, Owen saw the white figure of a single occupant. Next moment he had leapt from the *rickshaw* and run forward; for towards them, down the carriageway, his eyes green fire against their lanterns, raced Chao Phya, back arched, tail hoisted, like a galloping monkey. The beast wavered, stopped, crouched, dodged, and with long, stealing steps began to slink aside to the croton shadows. Owen caught him up, and sprinting, forged alongside Aunt Julia's *rickshaw*.

In the road ahead, at the verge of the lantern glow, a bulky white shape struggled to rise from the gravel. Above it a smaller man, with

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an underswing outrageously swift and violent, struck twice and thrice, seemed to wrench his fist away, turned. The slant eyes of Ho Kong blinked at the nearing lights. Then the blade of his knife gleamed as he dived into black leafage. The kneeling figure lurched to its feet, rose; and in a drunken stagger Borkman reeled past, his white tunic badged with blood.

“Giles! Giles!” screamed a woman’s voice at the gate.

Scarlett, transfixed, stared into the darkness, turned to speak, and found the *rickshaw* coolie trotting on as though nothing had occurred. He overtook Aunt Julia at the carriage steps, in time to hear Laura call from the stair-head —“Why, *there* she is! Where have you been all this time, Auntie?”

“Here, quick!” he panted. “Take Chao Phya! Quick! I must go see what happened.”

“What was it? What was it?” begged Aunt

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Julia, hugging the cat with a frantic tension. His dragon squirming seemed to recall her to herself.

“I shall not alarm Laura,” she whispered. “Come soon and tell me — everything.” He was rushing away, when she recalled him. “Oh, please! Please, without fail, get passage for us on the earliest steamer possible — yes, Colombo — to-morrow, any day, the sooner the better. I’ve had quite enough of this —”

Owen was off, running, to the gate. No one was there; the carriage had gone; well down the road echoed a rumble and a clatter. He recaptured his *rickshaw* and gave chase; but though the coolie bounded along at a flying stride, the ponies drew steadily away, and after many corners, disappeared.

Next morning he learned that a German mail steamer would sail for Colombo that after-

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noon. By furious despatch, he managed to get himself, the Holborows, and all their belongings safely on board. Beside him at the rail stood Laura, dressed — as when they first met before the tank of the devil-fish — in blue and white. Her colouring, in the level glow of sunset, was radiant; and her eyes danced with provocation.

“Why,” she asked wickedly, “did you dash away so last night? And why is Aunty so mysterious ever since? Where had you two been disporting yourselves?”

“It’s a long story,” he laughed, “and a strange one. I’d have told you to-day, but didn’t see either of you except in this rush, and before people. *Maskee!* we have the whole voyage for telling it.” He could not have helped the rejoicing in his tone. “A good long voyage. But it all begins with the cat. By the way, where is he? I’ll show you something he has — a present for you.”

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Through the orderly bustle of departure, Aunt Julia approached along the deck.

“Where’s Chao Phya?” called her niece.
“Mr. Scarlett’s going to — ”

In Aunt Julia’s voice, as in her look, vexation strove with guilt.

“I have settled it,” she announced. “These impudent officers forbade me to keep him with us. That was the last straw. I gave him to the cabin-boy to take ashore.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CAT'S HOLIDAY



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THE CAT'S HOLIDAY

Chao Phya was revelling in his liberty. Dropped on the quay by a cabin-boy who had no time to find buyers or drive bargains, he had fled zigzag through a labyrinth of hurried and hostile shins. Wherever coolies were not too busy, rapacious arms had swooped at him, but these he readily dodged. At the dock-gate a small, red-queued Straits boy fell on him cleverly, and held hard; but kicking with science, scratching the chubby arms, he fought loose, wormed between the little *baba's* trousered legs hopped over his fat white soles, and raced down the wide street. A coal-black Tamil dropped his shovel with a clang, and gave chase; but fleshless Dravidian legs could not wobble fast enough. Presenting to all pursuers a tail up-

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lifted above the humping gallop of stiff hind-legs, Chao Phya gained the safe reaches of an empty road.

Here, under the lee of silent go-downs, he trotted, with a faint tinkle of silver bells; then gradually slackening his pace, sauntered free and proud as one of his great jungle cousins. The sunset coolness, premonition of congenial night, prompted him to frisk. For pure wantonness, he hopped upon the high threshold of a warehouse, caressed the iron doors in a long, luxurious glide, hopped down again to stretch and wallow slantwise through a patch of packing-straw, then gambolled across the road for a tiger pounce on a dried *sirih* leaf that stirred along the curb. The whim of neatness seized him next; and sitting doubled upon himself, he had begun to lap his fawn-coloured flanks with a curled, heraldic tongue, when the sudden rush of footsteps set him off again, galloping.

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Down an alley of shops, that smelled deliciously of mature fish and frying ducks, he frolicked in the spirit of holiday. The threatening feet still pounded the flagstones, but more faintly in the distance. This fitful flight, this easy escape, was such a lark as —

In the very nick of exultation, a pair of white-swaddled legs darted across the path, dark fingers gripped him behind the ears, and an oily, grinning black man, in a tinsel-broidered skull-cap, swung him into a dim-lighted shop. He thumped the matting like a landed fish, fighting gamely. Acrid smoke filled the air, diffusing in spirals above a blossom of red coal that grew, tall-stalked, from the fat, gleaming brass belly of a *hookah*.

Suddenly he was hurled through a narrow door, which slammed behind him. In this new prison there was nothing likable — a dirty *charpoy*, a few dishes around a brazier, a box

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or two. All the smells were insipid or unpromising. Angry voices filled the shop, without. No, the place was not comfortable. Chao Phya began leaping for the tiny window cut through the split bamboo of the rear wall. It was very high: he fell back, leapt again, clawed his way upward, fell back, persevered in leaping and scratching. . . .

Had maledictions any force, Chao Phya never would have lived to do this; for Scarlett, racing in pursuit, had panted them so long as he could spare the breath. Trusting in the invariable delay of steamers, he had — to the amazement of Laura and her aunt — sprung down the gangway and across the docks. Fresh hope had changed to fresh rage, as he saw that crouching, fawn-and-seal-brown imp thread uncaptured among the chattering natives, wriggle from under the Khek urchin, outstrip the Tamil, and at last — so nearly taken unawares

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at his toilet — gallop free down the alley. “Back aboard ship,” Owen had told himself after each failure; and as often, disgust at losing the sole reward for all their trouble and danger, goaded him to another last attempt. “Just once more,” he was saying; as if fortune agreed, he saw Chao Phya caught up by the native in the *dhoti*.

Into which shop they disappeared, as he ran nearer, he could not be certain; for that end of the lane proved a small colony of Bengalis. But beneath the sign “Gobind Dass, Pinwallah of Calcutta,” the slamming of a door gave him pause.

“I want that cat,” he panted, to a dim figure that squatted by the pulsing coal of the *hookah*. “He’s mine. Quick! Hand him over!”

Gobind Dass rose and salaamed in the bitter smoke. Smiling, fawning, he submitted to the Sahib that there was no cat. How should there

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be a cat? See, there was nothing in this shop —

“Five dollars,” cried Owen. “Come! Hurry!”

The Pinwallah of Calcutta reconsidered the possibilities. Perhaps his neighbor Nabook had seen the cat, — perhaps stolen one, for Nabook was a bad man. He would go see. Ten dollars, however, would hardly make Nabook restore any possible cat —

But just then, while Owen fumed, he heard a thin, silvery jingle within. “Oh, *soolum!*” cried the shopkeeper: what violence and stronghand! for Owen had shoved him aside, plunged through the smoke, and torn open the door of the inner chamber.

Brown hindquarters and a ruffled tail struggled over the edge of the little window, and vanished.

For the first time, Scarlett paused to reason. To give up, — if Ho Kong had told the truth — was to renounce all sight of a fabulous trea-

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sure. On the other hand, he had already been lured so far from the docks, that now, run as hard as he might, the odds were he would miss the steamer, lose Laura, and have to show for it not even a jewel.

“Make sure of this, anyway,” he thought, exasperated. “Cable her at Colombo — catch them on the way Home.” And wrenching open the back door, he ran out. In the dusk, through rancid effluvia of Asiatic cooking, he sped after a small, furtive shadow that flitted, with tantalizing ease and swiftiness, between disorderly skeleton lines of half-woven baskets.

It scuttled round the corner, into a noisy street. Already the giant lanterns glimmered before Chinese shops, like swinging fire-balloons inscribed with symbols red and black; already the double file of *rickshaws*, streaming past with a faint wooden rattle and a “slap-slap” of flat soles, bore their jogging lights, as

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of stretched concertinas holding glow-worm fire. Evening gossips, squat on their haunches along the curb, broke into ripples of laughter, as the red-faced young European panted by, hot and scowling, at the heels of a worthless cat. The laughter rose to a cackle when Owen, gaining, stooped and snatched, to miss by a hand's-breadth, while Chao Phya again hoisted tail and loped away in terror.

The chase spread merriment thus for a furlong or two, the cat loitering and spurting with diabolic humour. Even British blue-jackets, racing their *rickshaws* against each other, cheering, and flogging the coolies with their canvas hats, found time to grin, wave passing encouragement, or shout satirical advice: "Stern chase, guvnor!" . . . "Ooray!" . . . "Salt on 'er tail!" . . . "Stole away!" . . . "Well run, puss!" . . .

Chao Phya led by some thirty yards. But

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suddenly, before a white-washed building, a burly little man in sailor's clothes jumped before him, blocked him with a ready foot, and scooped him up handily. At the same instant Owen slipped and fell headlong; struggling to his feet, dazed and muddy, he saw the man turn into the doorway.

Though the verandah lights had shone brightly down, the stairs within were dark. Chao Phya's new captor tramped overhead. As Scarlett stumbled upward, a faint light shone somewhere on the floor above, and a roaring bass filled the house:

*. . . meeserable sinnerr when I'm soberr,
But I'm awfu', awfu' happy when I'm fou!*

*An' I'm fou, the noo,
Absolutely fou,
But I adorre the country I was borrrn in!
Me name is Jock . . .*

The bang of a door shut off both light and song.

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Scarlett limped along the corridors, sighted the bright slit of a threshold. His knock was lost in a smothered uproar of applause. He opened the door, and went in.

Among blue, filmy layers of cigar-smoke, the strong glow of unshaded lamps lighted the faces of a ruddy, laughing company: men lounging in unbuttoned tunics, or bare-armed in their cinglets, filled both room and verandah. All watched a jovial giant who stood swaying on a battered billiard-table, rolling his grizzled head with the gusto, real or feigned, of drink. The singer, responding to his *encore*, bellowed:

*I've jist com' frae a weddin' 'r a funeral,
'R a chriss'enin' 'r a somethin'-o'-th'-kind. . . .*

At a corner table, apart, Owen spied the burly little man of the doorway. He held beneath a lamp the rebellious body of Chao Phya, and seemed to study the silver collar. Skirting

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the chairs, unheeded by singer or audience, Owen accosted the man in an undertone:

“That’s my cat, you know. I was chasing him when you caught him, below there.”

The other looked up. The lines of his broad, sunburned face were sullen, the cold grey eyes stared insolence.

“Ho, is ’e? Wot a bloomin’ shame!” he growled. “ ’Cause ’e ’appens to be mine.”

“That won’t go,” cried Owen testily. “You never saw him before. Give him here. I’m willing to pay you for catching him, of course.”

“Are you now?” scoffed the stranger. “That’s ’andsome of you, too. Pay me for catchin’ of my own cat — my old shipmate that ’as gone with me all these voyages!”

The song had stopped abruptly. The giant on the billiard-table, sober and aggrieved, was reasoning down at them in plaintive tones:

“*That’s* all I say! I don’t wish to force my-

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self on the present company, and am far from wishing to continue against the wishes o' any members that may be wishing me to stop. But when a man is *asked* to sing, and I may say urged to sing, and is only willing to oblige *by* singing, then —”

“I’m sorry to interrupt you,” said Owen, amicably. “I didn’t mean to make a disturbance,— and apologize for intruding.”

Flushed, dripping with sweat, and smeared full-length with mud as from a street-fight, he focused the attention of the roomful. “This animal here is a pet that escaped from ship-board. I’ve chased him all the way from the German Mail dock — probably lost my steamer. And now this man claims him, and refuses to give him up.”

“Stow your nonsense, there, Bob,” commanded the singer. He consulted a fat silver watch. “You may have time to

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make her yet, sir. Give the gentleman his property."

"Ho, hindeed!" growled Bob. "Wot are *you* sufferin' from, Metcalf? I say this is my cat, 'cause it *is* mine. 'E's gone many a voyage along of me." Scowling pugnaciously, he perched the cat on his broad shoulder. "If any o' my mates was 'ere, they'd swear theirselves black in the face to that. 'E's a Japanee cat. I bought 'im in Kobe, and I lost 'im 'ere this mornin'."

"That's odd," retorted Scarlett. His hope of reaching the ship had revived; and with rising temper, he sketched Chao Phya's history. Their common interest in pets drew the sailors by one's and two's, into a group round the disputants, — a group that broke out in good-humoured wrangling.

"That's wot 'e is. . . . Who's to prove it? . . . I tell you it *ain't* no Jap . . .

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I was in Bangkok once, an' they 'ad . . .
Don't have no such sharp noses, I tell you
. . . There's a Blue Funnel man 'ad a
monkey that . . . 'E's a bloomin' Manx,
wot run away afore they could chop off his
tail . . . spit an' image of 'im. Old Spie-
sen o' the "Chow Fa" has one, name of Peter
. . . I can bloomin' well prove it . . ."

Ransacking his pockets, Scarlett felt only a handful of Straits silver and his useless letter of credit . . . Chao Phya's possessor noted the movement, and his surly eyes brightened.

"I'm willin' to sell," he admitted. "But this cat — w'y, this old chum an' me, we wouldn't part under five pound — no, nor under fifty dollars!"

Scarlett could contain himself no longer.

"You'll part with him for nothing," he said angrily. "Will you give him up without trouble, or do you want to fight for him?"

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Open-mouthed stupour fell on the company. Then, to Owen's surprise, all hands laughed uproariously.

"Cert'nly, mate," replied the sailor, with an obliging air. "That's a fair offer. I'd fight you for less." He grinned cheerfully, winked at the on-lookers, and plied his stubby fingers at his buttons.

Murmurs of protest mingled with the laughter: ". . . not hardly fair . . . Will 'e fight? well, rather! . . . Go on, tell 'im, Mac . . . The youngster looks 'andy enough, too . . . But he'd ought to know who he was takin' on. . . ."

A grey-beard engineer shook his head at Scarlett, solemnly.

"Man," said he, "'tis but honest to inform ye, thon man is Bob Cutts, that fought a drawn fight o' twenty rounds at Kowloon, wi' Tom Johnston—

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him they call the Champion o' the China Squadron."

"Thanks," said Owen; then added stiffly —
"It doesn't affect my offer."

"That's the ticket!" cried a voice, hearty though nasal. "That's the way to talk to 'em, mister." A tall young man, with a lean, hard face of the American type, clapped him on the shoulder. "Say, take me for your second? That's the ticket! Oh Boy! bring towels, savee?"

Working with seamanlike despatch, they dragged the tables aside, and placed the lamps in safety. As Owen stripped to the waist in a corner, his second maintained a friendly chatter. "Say, you're an American, ain't you? I spotted you right off. So'm I, — born in Salem, Mass' — third on the 'Lambert' — oil-ship. Here, take my deck-shoes — keep you from slippin', see?" He felt Owen's shoulder

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and biceps, gave a muted whistle. "Say, if you get a good crack at that feller, he won't think no goose kicked him, will he?"

The grizzled singer and the Scots engineer approached with ceremony, to propose themselves as referees. Scarlett, his thoughts flying forward to the ship and Laura, nodded assent to their terms.

"Make it a short bout," he stipulated.

From the other corner, his foe nodded, half-friendly and half-scornful. His face and neck, ruddy as briar-root, reared from shoulders of knotted ivory.

"Right-oh!" he laughed. "It'll be short enough, guvnor."

The man from Salem, tying to Scarlett's wrists a pair of dark, malodorous gloves, whispered excitedly: "Don't you mind him. I've seen his work — 'tain't so much . . . slugger . . . strong as a bullock . . ."

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but old-fashioned. Don't mix it up . . .
use plenty o' footwork . . . look sharp
and cross-counter. . . . Mind you, use
your right on him. . . .”

A bell rang sharply. The spectators lined the edge of the verandah, swung up to the tables, flattened themselves in corners. With a parting slap, the second muttered in Scarlett's ear. “Kill the bloomin' lime-juicer!” And the two men stepped out into the centre, where a swaying Chinese lantern twirled on the floor a spidery shadow of thin spokes.

Pre-eminent on the billiard-table, the engineer announced judicially:

“This argument, gentlemen, will tairminate in seven rounds. It will effect a deceesion as to whether this cat is a Jap or a Siamee cat, and which of these two human bein's is the better man.”

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Thus, for the first time in his life, and against all expectation, Scarlett found himself a "principal" in a ring. He was too eager and angry to care, though his heart thumped curiously. Opposite him, Cutts, crouching already, and hunching upward one of his Atlantean shoulders, stretched out arms tattooed from wrist to deltoid in red and blue patterns on a satin skin, — arms heavy, long as a gorilla's, and rippling with tense muscles. Their padded hands clinched once, lightly, in formal salute. Then, as if stung by an electric contact, the two men sprang apart. The sailor, — his lips curled in a set, ominous smile, and his tattooed arms slowly working — crouched and shifted warily, like a bull-dog stealing in for his under-hold. Through a long, indelible moment, Scarlett noted the light scuff of their feet, a tinkle of the cat's bells in the hush, the heavy sweetness of incense, and smothered thunder

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of vesper gongs from some neighbouring joss-house.

In the first minute, at the first onset, the whole affair seemed over. Reckless, and with the fatal folly of bad temper, Owen had rushed in, driven straight at that taunting smile the full force of his left, and met a staggering counter-shock that jarred his head backward as if on a bad hinge. His vision swam hazily; and in a ringing confusion the sailor's onslaught swept him back with a whirl of battering, half-guarded blows, — drove him to a corner, penned him, forced him to clinch. Hugging the smooth, hard-wrenched body, he heard a cool chuckle of triumph; then — as with straining muscles they pushed asunder, cautiously — a vicious jab, just above the belt, sent him sick and hopeless to the floor.

It slanted like a deck while he laboured dizzily to hands and knees. Above the tumult, the

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nasal cry of his friend from Salem rang indignant — “Foul, a foul!” He heard a slow voice counting: “Five, sax, seven. . . .”

“No!” he gasped. “No foul! No, no! A fair blow.”

He regained his feet somehow, dodged unsteadily but swiftly from the attack, slipped away, skirted the room full circle. A lucky instinct made him duck below a ferocious swing; and the whiff and wind of it, passing over his crown, seemed miraculously to clear the air. He bobbed up a fighting man again, cool, amused, anxious to win, and to keep a painful smile on cracked and puffing lips.

The downfall had done him good. Presently, in the exchange of feinting and checked blows, his fist landed true on the jaw. “ ’Andy work, mate,” grunted his opponent, cheerfully. And spurred by that contempt, but without hurry, he landed three times more on body and head.

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He had begun to enjoy himself, and the sailor to puff somewhat, when the bell rang and the loud talk broke out.

Relaxed in a chair, he submitted his face to the mopping of the second, who chatted steadily: "You're all right . . . but didn't I tell you not to mix it . . . plain straight counter that got you first . . . child's play . . . I thought 'twas all off. . . . That was a shore way o' doin' things, wasn't it? . . ." Flapping his towel punkah-wise, he fanned vigorously. "Don't you try that no more, now. . . . Put your right hand to him . . . mind what I tell you . . . lick him yet. . . . Hear that? *He* said that he didn't expect no second round!"

On the billiard cloth Chao Phya sat blinking. He gave a cavernous, pink yawn, then started nervously as the Scotch-

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man hammered the plunger of the table-bell.

At the first stroke Cutts rolled out to his place, and before the last he was plunging forward, greedy to give and take. This time, however, Scarlett danced free, just beyond reach, "with wanton heed and giddy cunning"; placed a light blow now and then, romped round the sailor, and stepped aside from his heavy charges, as a *chulo* evades a bull. Once or twice, laughter rose. And as Owen had hoped, the sunburned face that swayed before him took on a settled scowl. For two minutes he skirmished thus. "That's the game!" crowed his backer, repeatedly. At last, with a snarl—"Fight, damn ye!"—Cutts ran for him wildly, lashed out at full stretch.

The glove rasped hot past Owen's neck, in the same instant that, with all his power and to the impetus of both bodies, he gave the

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cross-counter. The sailor staggered back with chin uplifted, swayed, for an interminable space, as though undecided which way to fall, then gently collapsed like a limp bolster.

After dumbfounded silence, a roar drowned the engineer's counting; but above the hubbub shrilled the voice of Scarlett's second, who, with an idiot face of glee, pirouetted in a skirt of towels, chanting:

Yankee doodle doodle doodle
Doodle doodle doodle . . .

The figure on the floor had not moved. Two men were kneeling beside it. One looked up suddenly, and said:

“He's killed him.”

Long afterwards Owen recalled the fellow's face, the matter-of-fact tone, the stillness and scared looks in the room, the scolding singsong of coolies chattering in the road below. Nor did he soon forget the equal shock of relief when an

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uncertain voice broke the silence, mumbling:

“’E jolted me proper, didn’t ’e?”

The sailor stirred, rolled over, and with a heave of white shoulders, sat up, grinning, dazed and sheepish.

“I give ye best man,” he announced to the general world. Catching Owen’s eye, he nodded, feebly but amiably. “If I’d kept off the drink this week past, p’raps ye wouldn’t be, guvnor. ’E’s your cat.”

Scarlett would have snatched the prize and run; but a late comer from the docks had seen the ship leave half an hour before. Laura was gone; his new acquaintances thronged about him, with artless compliments; so yielding to pressure, he adjourned with them to a disreputable small hotel, where they had a capital dinner of French cookery in a tiny closed garden, with good liquor, songs, and curious tales from many ports. They broke up at three in the

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morning; when Bob Cutts, shaking hands affectionately for the last of some two-score farewells, declared with tears that the pair of them together could abolish the German navy.

In his bedroom, Scarlett was rubbing his bruised and stiffened limbs.

“You’re all that’s left me, Chao,” he reflected. “Had a merry evening, haven’t we?”

The cat stared up with pale, distrustful eyes, yawned, lifted his nose in a sleepy stretch. His collar shone in the lamplight. The middle bell was missing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

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Colombo was long to figure in Scarlett's mind as a Delphic city hidden behind numberless sunsets, towards which his ship crawled with sluggish keel, bringing the weightiest question in the Orient. Should he ever see Laura? This uncertainty, assuming the various guises of confidence, despair, resignation, prolonged and embittered his westward course; till at last the oracle gave answer, in a G. O. H. envelope, inscribed with the same handwriting that had saved his life two thousand miles away.

Colombo was a joyful place; and the Clock Tower Light winked a knowing farewell. Nothing else had mattered. Heaving aside the oily stillness of the Arabian Sea, the ship throbbed northward. Slowly, one by one, the friendly

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world unrolled familiar sights to beguile him into patience: the clinkered mounts of Aden; the scorching, breathless floor of the Red Sea; the steady host of ships that passed, close aboard, dipping their ensigns — greedy ships of empire, sullenly racing for the treasures of the East; and then the solemn desert mountains of Asia and Africa narrowing in on either hand, sharp, crinkled peaks — changeless background of the Exodus — in dusty yellow, ashen grey, and ashen pink, with ghostly clouds of sandstorm lifting, swirling, falling about their bases.

In the mean time, Laura's letter had grown worn with folding and unfolding.

“We are very glad” — she had written — “to find your cable message waiting for us here at Colombo. I wish we were to stay here till you yourself follow it; but my aunt consents only to make a flying visit to Kandy, and then will

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hurry on. She has already spent two winters in Egypt; and as it is now the off season there, and hot, she was for sailing calmly by. At this point, however, I — who have not seen Egypt — rebelled. So we shall go up the Nile at least to Assouan, and then return to Port Said and take ship for Marseilles. As that will be about the fifteenth of next month, can't you join us there?

“I am overjoyed to think that you are bringing back old Chao Phya. You cannot imagine our surprise when you went plunging down the gang-plank to rescue him. . . . Aunt Julia still thinks that every one had gone mad after the cat. We are both consumed to hear what it was all about, and why they locked you up and chased you, and whether they killed that poor wretched Borkman, and what your despatch means by ‘Collar had ruby, now lost.’ I have invented wild romances to explain it all.

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So you must come along and tell us, and give us an opportunity to thank you for the kind things you have done. . . .”

All went happily, he reflected, as the ship slid out of the Bitter Lakes, past Serapium, and on between the desolate banks of the canal. For two days yet, no ship would leave Port Said for Marseilles. He was sure to find her. Chao Phya, in snug quarters below, was sleeping out the voyage. The Burmese ruby, to be sure, was gone. Only the shank of the bell, nipped off as by strong pincers, remained to prove that their past adventures were not a dream. Whether Ho Kong had won, whether Borkman had kept it and survived, or dying had given it to his friend Justine, they would never know. What odds? thought Scarlett: one jewel the less, — not worth a grain of this tawny dust where, on the rim of Egypt, he should meet Laura.

It was high, dry noon by the desert sun when

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— among the crowded hulls of the world, Greek, Welsh, Italian, Russian, Khedivial, jostling in a black smudge of smoke and coal-dust — his steamer crept to her moorings in the canal mouth. And as fast as his Arab could row to the quay, Scarlett made for the shipping-offices. All remaining doubts he soon resolved; for there, booked among the next week's sailings, he found the names of Aunt Julia and her niece. He despatched a dragoman for his trunks, brought Chao Phya ashore, mewing, in a basket, and settled down at the least dingy hotel in Port Said, to wait with content.

As he gave in his name, the manager surprised him by saying:

“Your friend has expected you. He has inquired several times.”

“What friend?” asked Owen. The manager could not remember, — was not sure that the gentleman had given his name: but he was a tall

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man, clean-shaven, of military appearance, though very pale, — in fact, plainly an invalid. He had spoken, said the manager, as though he lived in Alexandria.

No one in the roll-call of memory answered to the description; no one in all Egypt, save Laura and her aunt, knew that Scarlett was to pass even through that part of the world; and he was puzzled not a little. When the days lagged by, however, and brought no news of the stranger, Owen gave up the matter as a mistake.

The interval of waiting passed pleasantly. Now that Chao Phya, stripped to his intrinsic worth, could be immured or left with servants like any common cat, he had ceased to be a clog and burden. At this lively coal-bin by the great ditch, where night and day, to the click of backgammon men and the thin strains of café violins, the chattering races of all conti-

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nents smoked and drank in a clutter of pistachio shells, he hailed more than one familiar white-clad figure that passed, lonely and bored, with rolling gait, through the feathery shade of the acacias. More than one of these old friends — skippers of China ships, bound outward or homeward — sat late with him, rejoicing to exchange the latest gossip from the little, far-scattered community of the East. At tiffins aboard ship, noisy and grimed with coaling, or at bad dinners in cramped rooms ashore, they talked of men, women, and ships, of things past, of wars, bargains, jokes, and tragedies half a world away. And then, with a laugh and a “Chin-chin!” these transient friends were gone, never, by all chance, to be seen again.

Such encounters carried his thoughts back to many a scene beyond the Straits; but on the night before Laura should arrive, something else was to carry them, and with a start of as-

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tonishment, back to those bewildered days in Bangkok.

He had entered his bedroom and turned on the light; and there along the wall stood his trunks and bags, yawning open, their contents tumbled in disorder. The former attempt of Ho Kong recurred to him so vividly that he unbolted the shutters of the French window, and stepped out quickly, as though half expecting to see again the plump goldsmith's clerk. But this time the long, dark verandah was empty.

As midnight was now past, the intruder could have had choice of the four hours since dinner. For his pains he had got little enough: he had left all of Scarlett's few valuables, but taken his revolver and cartridges, and — strangest of all — had cut in two every cake of soap in the room, had poured into the basin a pint of excellent brandy, had flayed half the leather from the flask itself, and torn to shreds every

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one of fifty fat, black Indian cigars. It seemed the mischief of an ape or a madman.

He reported to a sleepy Arab, received his vain protestations, and was soon in bed. Sleep, however, came reluctantly. Long thoughts of the morrow filled his mind, of how he should meet Laura, of what they should tell each other; then these grew confused, and gave way to a weary half sleep.

It must have been towards morning that he found himself awake and wondering. The room was flooded with light. He rolled over, and through blur of sleep and haze of mosquito-curtain saw, sitting at the table in the middle of the room, a stranger in grey flannels. The trembling brilliancy of the drop-light swung just above the close-cropped head. They eyed each other in silence for a moment. "The stranger from Alexandria," was Owen's first rational thought; for his visitor was tall,

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square-shouldered, with a hard, imperious face, clean of feature, and pale as with a mortal sickness. The thin lips drooping cynically at the corners, the deep parenthetical gravings in either cheek, not only gave the face a cruel look, but bespoke a man tugged of fortune. Both the broad forehead and the heavy-shadowed eyes, alert and thoughtful, were curiously familiar. The stranger smiled.

“Don’t know me, do you, Mr. Scarlett?” he said, with the voice of Borkman. “Good-morning.”

The surprise brought also a presentiment of disaster. Owen stared, incapable of speech.

“One’s beard does make a difference, doesn’t it?” said the other, affably. “But I see you know my voice. No way of shaving that off, is there? Unfortunate, because the further west of Suez we go, the more persons know me whom I’m not anxious to meet again. However,

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I'm hoping we part company to-night, — this morning, rather."

"What do you want?" asked Owen, sitting up.

"What do you suppose?" laughed Borkman. "What *could* have brought me all this way to see you, when the doctor said it would finish me to move? What took me down to visit your cat in the cellar of 'this battered caravanserai'? Eh? What made me go through all your things this evening — soap, flask, boot-heels, shaving-brush handle, cigars, the whole *sub chiz*, — and your clothes since you've been asleep? Come now, you're by no means an ass. I used to believe I wasn't, till that morning I lost my temper aboard the 'Muang-Fang.' That was my mis-play in this game, wasn't it?"

"If you mean the ruby that Ho Kong told me about," said Owen, "I haven't it. I've never even seen it."

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Borkman shrugged his great shoulders, but stopped with a twitch as of pain.

“That hurt my side,” he grumbled. “The thing’s barely healing — So you’ve never seen it, eh? Naturally, that’s the first light in which you’d wish to view the affair. Please consider. I’ve another argument to bring forward later, if necessary.”

“I haven’t it,” repeated Owen. “You’ve taken your journey for nothing. I’ve thought either you had it or the goldsmith’s clerk.”

“Think again,” said Borkman, satirically. “When you saw Ho Kong cutting me up there in the carriage-way, I’d just come from bribing the cat out of the servants’ quarters. There wasn’t light enough or time enough for me to unlock the collar or cut it off. As for the goldsmith coolie, he hopped out of those bushes and knifed me like winking. The beastly cat jumped straight out of my arms into yours. Well?”

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“I didn’t know that,” said Owen. “That makes it more of a puzzle than ever.” He recounted briefly his dealings in Singapore. “So you see you’re here for nothing.”

“Interesting story and well told,” admitted Borkman, smiling. “Only I don’t believe a word of it. Now it’s time you saw things in that other light I spoke of. Here’s what may persuade you.” He withdrew his hand from the table, and disclosed a black, polished object — the missing revolver. “I should regret using this, both for your sake and my own. But my affairs are at such low ebb, nothing can make them much worse. And the thing itself is a good tidy fortune. I’ll give you one minute to tell where you’ve stowed it. Then if you are still stubborn, I’ll begin firing promptly, and the odds are I’ll pot you first shot. You’d best not move in the mean time.”

He unhooked his watch, laid it on the table,

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and studied it for an instant, like a lecturer preparing to speak by the dial.

“Minute begins now,” he announced. The ticking sounded at once loud and distant.

“You don’t dare to, in this hotel.” Owen managed to speak calmly.

“Don’t I?” retorted Borkman. “Wait and see. I’ll put the revolver beside you, leave this good-bye chit for the girl — you know how well I do your handwriting: wish there were time to read you my bit of composition — then go out by the verandah, bolt the shutters in the same way that I unbolted them. No one else on your floor. Clear case, eh? *Felo de se?*” Grinning, he bent towards the watch. “Half-time. Anything to say?”

“I give you my word of honour,” said Owen, slowly, “that I’ve never seen the stone, that I haven’t it now, and that I don’t know where it is.”

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The pale face, strange and yet well-known, regarded him unchanging, from beneath the light. The tiny voice of Time continued, brisk as a cricket. A sense of monstrous unfairness oppressed him, that on the eve of rejoining Laura this could happen, and for something that he had neither sought nor possessed.

“Past three-quarters,” said Borkman. He raised the eloquent cold muzzle. “Feel like saying anything?”

“What’s the use?” rejoined Scarlett, angrily. “I gave you my word of honour.”

A few seconds of silence followed; then Borkman lowered his hand.

“Wish I had a drink,” he grumbled. “Haven’t had one since the doctor cut me off. Might as well, though. As you say, what *is* the use? Damn it, youngster!” he tossed the pistol on the table, nodding vigorously, with an air of disgust — “do you know, I believe you. Wish I

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didn't. Wish I had a drink. No, it wasn't courage on your part, . . . or lying it out . . . just the truth. I felt that . . . because [I'd put you in a blue funk.]”

“You'd not!” cried Owen, disdainfully.

“Then why, to be precise, are you trying to rip down the curtain?”

For the first time, Owen was aware that his hand, raised and full of torn mosquito-gauze, was trembling violently.

“Don't attempt lying,” advised the big man, with a contemptuous chuckle. “You can't. Rum things, these words of honour.” He snapped the chain back on his watch, stood musing, then added with a note of wonder: “My word, I've seen them make a man act against his own interest — mind you, his own interest. Funny things. . . .”

He pondered again, shaking his cropped head.

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“So Giles Borkman is on his blooming little beam-ends,” he continued. “That stone . . . the only perfect pigeon-blood I’ve ever seen; even badly cut, it was a fortune. Well, makee finish! The pockmarked coolie has it, I dare say, or the other Chinaman. Yes: that’s where it’s gone. They followed us down to the Straits, just as Ho Kong did; and if I could bribe the servants that evening, why so could they — and before I arrived.”

He looked very white and old as he stood there, a tired giant, stroking by force of habit his bare chin.

“Not all beer and skittles, is it?” he inquired eying Scarlett as though out of a reverie. “I mean my sort of pidgin, you know. Now it’s back to the East again. There’s a Bibby to sail this morning, early. God knows what next . . . perhaps I’ll makee finish myself, eh? Had some queer thoughts lately, lying on my

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back so long. By the way, tell the ladies that their shipmate, the invalid gentleman, sends them his salaam. I travelled all the way here with them, knowing you'd turn up, of course."

He edged closer to the table, picked up the revolver, snapped it open, jingled the cartridges in his palm.

"You never can tell just how far to trust these word-of-honour persons, after all," he explained. "Words of honour! Anyway, good-bve, my boy."

Something in the painful movements, the downcast face, the air of defeat, evoked a kindly feeling as Owen replied:

"Good-bye. I wish you luck, Borkman, and a better pidgin."

"Don't preach," he answered with a grimace. "That's how you have always made me tired. Thanks, all the same."

He unhooked the door, went out, and closed

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it. Suddenly, opening it again, he thrust in his head, and fixed the young man with a long scrutiny.

“I don’t see what it is about you,” he declared, as if in deep perplexity. “Why didn’t I pull trigger then? Hmph! And do you recall kicking me once? What do you think? Turned Christian, or am I fey? You’re beyond me. . . . And yet talk of your open books. . . .”

He withdrew his head, shut the door, and departed. After a space, however, he returned and looked in once more, grinning sourly:

“That must be the reason why you can never read any one else. That Holborow girl — nice little thing: may interest you to know, she’s head over heels in love with a young idiot.”

This time he was gone forever, leaving Scarlett bolt upright, with his mind in a whirl.

And yet this final message, which at the dawn

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was worth all the dangers he had passed, became by daylight the palest mockery and dream; for that afternoon, as he walked with Laura, it did not in the least encourage or avail him. Their ship was to sail next morning; Aunt Julia was despatching a multitude of letters; they had shared half the bright day. He had unfolded the full history of Chao Phya and the lost ruby of Burmah; the cat himself now trotted with them along the Quai Francois Joseph, as they gave him, with fluctuating success, his first lesson in following to heel; nothing remained for Owen but to tell his own story: yet the sun was drawing down behind Lake Menzaleh, and still their talk idled in generalities. Never, of any one in his life before, had he been so afraid.

They loitered out on the long breakwater, and passed beside the pedestal on which the bronze de Lesseps, stiff and commonplace,

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waves clumsy permission to sailor nations who hold the gorgeous East in fee. Four times, between this statue and the end of the breakwater, Owen began; and four times Laura, constrained and wary, slipped away like the poet's filly in the fields.

"How large a ruby could they put inside the bell?" she asked, irrelevantly.

"Who cares?" said Owen. "But I'll show you."

An old Arab perched on the edge, fishing,— a little heap of bait beside him, and his provender of unripe dates forming a vermilion puddle in the sunlight. He lent his knife, courteously, with a wrinkled smile.

Owen caught up Chao Phya, and pried at one of the remaining bells.

"Do be careful!" commanded Laura. "You'll cut him. You wouldn't care, would you? Men don't like cats."

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The edges of the cockle-shell began slowly to gape.

“Love me, love my dog,” said Owen suddenly, looking up. “That holds, even with a Siamese cat. Laura. . . .”

His voice trembled. Both had turned a little pale, and the girl, studying the broad squares of stone, would have drawn away. But they stood now at the outermost verge; and as he continued speaking, she could find no way of escape. The moist wind fluttered her skirts. The dark waves of the Mediterranean, mother sea of our anxious western world, danced towards them from the sunset.

Something tinkled at their feet. In their happy trouble and confusion, they glanced down.

Ho Kong had fooled them one and all, had played his own hand, and lost; for there on the warm-lighted granite shone a pebble brighter

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than the dates, brighter than the blood it had cost.

“Oh!” cried Laura, her eyes wide and frightened. She had stepped back as if from a cockatrice. “Look, Owen! What. . . .”

He stooped, caught it up, and held his closed hand over the water that plashed below.

“Unless you hear me out now,” he threatened, “I’ll throw it in.”

THE END



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FLEX BINDING

